A Splitting Of The Mind

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A Splitting Of The Mind

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Summary

Gerard Way sees the world differently. Alone and institutionalised, Gerard claims that he is being hunted, and that his mind holds the key to existence. Does Gerard really hold such a powerful secret? Or is he just insane like everyone else in the institution?

Notes

This is a re-post of my story A Splitting of the Mind. The original can be found here at my livejournal

This is the only other official upload of ASOTM since Wattpad deleted the story for violating their policies.
All other copies are unauthorised and annoy the hell out of me.
Frequently Asked Questions now after the last chapter
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Update March 24 2025: I have updated Frank's age to 18 as this is the legal age of consent and his age before was inappropriate. Please notify me if I've missed editing an old age in the text.

A Splitting of the Mind

Chapter Summary

> I've spent some time going through and changing Frank's age to 18 as it is the legal age of consent and his previous age was inappropriate. Please notify if I missed any ages in the text and I'll update.

Take a look around and what do I see
It's looking like the whole world's goin just a little crazy
And I know it can't be all of them and just not me
So I guess I'm going just a little crazy

-'Crazy', The John Butler Trio

From the first moment I laid eyes upon him, I decided I liked him. That was saying something, because I don't much like anyone. I can't afford to like or trust anyone. Not anymore.

He slunk in one morning, head down, eyes x-raying the floor, shoulders tense and overall trying to look like he didn't exist. I saw him appear in the doorway and quickly slip into the armchair Magda pointed out to him. He didn't look around or make a noise or speak. He just sat there, as straight as he could in the sagging cushions of the blue and white striped armchair. He clasped his hands together tightly and placed them carefully on his lap, the thumbs facing the ceiling. A moment later his hands unclasped and one hand flew to his mouth where he began gnawing on a fingernail. Then, as though realising the full extent of his habit, he removed his fingers from his mouth and reclasped his hands back in his lap. Then he began to twiddle his

thumbs instead. My eyes drifted away from the distracting hands and to his face. God, he was young. Too young to be in a place like this. He must be pretty fucked up. His face was pale, like it had been cast in moonlight. I twisted my head to check his eyes. His face may have looked like moonlight, but there were definitely no stars in his eyes. They were hazel, I could tell. I couldn't see. But I didn't need to see. *I just knew*. He had the whole 'poor baby' thing going too, but, to his credit, he wasn't exploiting it. On my first days I would've killed to have the "poor little victim baby" thing going.

A shout of laughter rippled through the room and he jumped. Scared, he cautiously looked up only to find everyone fixated on the stupid television. He took a quick glance around the room, assuming everyone was watching the television. I wasn't. I was still watching him. I focused on his lips now. Straightaway I could tell that those lips had touched another person and was disappointed. But there was no love on his face. There were no remnants of who had kissed him in his eyes or mouth or soul. He had hidden the memory of them inside of him and that distinctly annoyed me. If people hide things, then they have to actually look to find them. It's okay if you lose them, or misplace them, or put them somewhere else, you can still stumble across them. Just like your first kiss. If it was a good memory, don't try and hide it somewhere – just put it somewhere. If you hide it, you'll never just stumble across it. But, if you forget it or misplace it, you never know when it might come back. You never know when it'll pop up in your subconscious and give you a nice surprise. But if it's a bad kiss, you try to forget and lose the memory so you'll never stumble across it again. It's quite sad actually when people forget to lose a memory and are haunted by it for the rest of their lives. But the brain is not just like a filing system, or a big tunnel with two exits saying 'keep' or 'chuck'. You can't physically file your memories; you don't actually get to decide which ones you lose for good or which ones you simply misplace. I'm the only one who knows this, so, naturally, I know how to do it. If I'm really bored and Jasper is not here I sort through the week's memories and file them, but a lot of the time I just let them go, it's no big deal once you've cracked the secret. Though I bet if anyone else did it would be groundbreaking. Imagine being able to lose memories of a tragic childhood incidence or forget all the deaths you've witnessed. Think of how much a doctor or an ambulance officer would give to be able to forget things like that.

So, that's how all memories work. Don't ask me how I know – *I just know*. And now you know, so if I hear of a groundbreaking new study about memories I'll know. I'll even understand if you don't credit me. After all, I'm just a teenage kid and that doesn't give me much

credibility, does it?

Back to the new kid. He's taken up staring at the TV now, instead of his lap. I hate that TV! Doesn't anyone realise how easily that box kills your brain cells? Annoyed, I ground my teeth together so hard Ben turned around.

"That's not a good idea now, is it?" he said in his annoyingly calm, orderly way.

I purposely rolled my eyes and ceased the grinding. I don't want to be here. I hated TV time. They think that we're all so interested in who gets voted off American Idol. Who cares? Half of them can't sing anyway. My money's on the chick, and I don't even watch the show. She's gonna win though, I knew it. I shuffled in my armchair so my back is resting against one padded arm and my legs are propped over the other. Another ripple of laughter courses the room and I glanced at the television, wondering what was *so* funny about American Idol. Only, it's not Idol that on but some crap TV sitcom. Holy shit! Quick! I need something to gouge my eyes out with and deafen myself with before too much of this stupidity seeps into my brain. Somebody must've changed the channel because now that I think about it, I don't recall the sounds of American Idol at all this session. I must be slipping. How could I let such a little observation slip past me? Oh yeah, it was the arrival of that new kid. The one with messy, once-styled black hair. I could still smell the gel he used to use in it. Yeah, of course he's washed it since he came here, but, like I said, I know stuff. And I know he used to gel his hair.

There is a quiet click but to my ears it is so loud because I have been awaiting it all day. The TV is off! Hallelujah!

"Lunchtime!" said Magda in an overly cheery voice, beaming at us all.

I moaned and purposely took my time unhooking my legs from the arms of the chair. I desperately hoped Ben didn't decide to wait for me. However, he's not waiting for me but instead for the new little black haired kid who was sitting trying to look as inconspicuous as possible in his armchair. He offered a hand to the kid to pull him out of the chair. The black-haired kid learnt the hard way how difficult it is to extract yourself from the cushions of that particular chair. It swallows you in; sucks your arse in the base of the chair. I chuckled as he gripped the arm and tried to haul himself out.

"Here, let me help. Can I touch your arm?" Ben asked carefully, his

hand still extended and quite close to the boy's.

The little victim shook his head violently and retracted his hands, terrified, clutching them close into his body, staring up at Ben like he was threatening him. Ben holds up his hands hastily, indicating no contest.

I raised an eyebrow to myself and passed Ben on my way to the door. I paused, my back facing the two and shook my head slowly. I turned back around to face them both, smirking.

"What are you smirking at, Gerard?" Ben snapped, watching the kid and looking defeated.

I raised a finger to indicate patience then began to slowly undo the tie around my neck. Slowly, systematically, and carefully I undid it, preferring to reverse every step rather than loosen it. I took it off my neck and dangled it in front of the kid's chair. He's watching me with such intense scrutiny I'm quite affronted. If I was mocking him, he would know, and would not have to resort to attempting to read me. He finally decided my intentions were pure, or whatever; he just finally took the loop of the tie I held out to him. In one swift motion I hauled him out onto his feet. He staggered for a bit but I didn't move to steady him. He didn't want anyone to touch him. I had to respect that. If he fell and cracked his head, I wouldn't touch him. If it was against his wishes to be touched, then I wouldn't do it. It wasn't that hard to comprehend.

Once out of the chair he was steadily going bright red. I let go of the tie and it fell, slack, in his hands. He bundled it up and held it out to me. I shook my head and made my way to lunch; I was hungry, after all.

A Splitting of the Mind

“Well, good morning, Gerard!” Inside I cringed, but outside I sent the lunch lady one of my most dashing smiles as I picked up my tray. I ignored her persistent attempts for me to converse with her and made my way to my table. Yes it was *my* table. Nobody sits at my table without my permission. *No one*.

I glanced down at my chicken noodle soup. Lucky this time it’s not alphabet soup. Otherwise I can guarantee Ray will announce he can see a message in it. Maybe that’s why they stopped serving any dish with letters. I had a customary moment of silence for the loss of alphabet soup off the menu before carefully unwrapping my plastic spoon. I held it firmly because I definitely didn’t want to drop it. Then I would have to get *another spoon*. And I didn’t particularly want to do that.

“Hey! Ben, Madga, Suzie! Quick, come look at this!” Ray’s voice rang through the cafeteria. I snorted as Ray backed away from his noodles carefully. “Look, it’s a message!”

I knew I could count of Ray to find messages in anything. I just hope they didn’t take noodles off the menu altogether now as well. I quite liked the noodles. Once I had finished I stared at the bowl, at the last dregs of little white worms, wondering where they would go and which ocean they would end up in. I pulled my sketch book out of the inside pocket of my jacket and opened it on the table. I took out my pencil and touched the end to my tongue before pressing it to the page. There wasn’t exactly any artistic reasoning behind that. Just a habit really. I started to sketch the new black haired kid. He was very drawable. He had the perfectly chiselled features and uncaptured beauty of a model, of *my* next model. I didn’t draw his body. I wanted to get the contours exactly right. They had to be just right. Getting them wrong would be disastrous. But he was rugged up, as we all were, in jackets, scarves and long track pants. I wasn’t cold; I only wore the jacket because they made me. I preferred my black button up formal shirt with a tie. But that was only on Tuesdays and Thursdays. You see, only on days starting with a T could I wear a Tie. On the other days I stuck to hoodies. They’re pretty good with clothes in this place. You get to wear whatever you want, within reason. I mean, they’re not gonna let a manic depressive wear a tie and leave him alone in the bathroom are they? But they trust me. They know I’m not

going to kill myself anytime soon. I still haven't cracked the meaning of life, and they know that.

"Uh, hi."

My head seems to move very mechanically. It's quite amusing actually. I glanced straight up at the new black haired kid. The one with the sad eyes and tragically kissed lips. I grunted and looked back down. I stopped scratching with my pencil for a second and heard the heavy, terrified breathing of the kid and felt a pang of sympathy. I wondered which orderly had suggested he talk to me. Probably Ben. I glanced over at Ben. He was watching me. Yep, Ben put him up to it. The only problem was: Why? Sure, I mean, if a kid wants to talk to me, fine. I'm not gonna talk back, but I'm not gonna kick him in the crotch and laugh when he rolls on the floor in pain.

"Can I sit? Please?"

I nodded and he perched himself on the end of the seat opposite me. He just stared at the ground. Then he leapt back up and scurried away. Bemused, I went back to my drawing. A few moments later he comes back and sits back down. He stayed this time and watched me draw until an orderly approached and spoke to him. She left and he followed her. I wondered where he was going. The next thing on the stupid schedule was showers, and that wasn't for an hour at least. I saw Ben approaching me and as he passed me I hear him murmur, "Thank you, Gerard, for not being an ass."

I couldn't concentrate for the rest of the session. Why was Ben thankful I wasn't an ass to the new kid? Why was it so imperative that I was anything but an ass to that kid? Was I gonna get extra pudding after dinner?

At the showers I waited until last, as always. Of course, in here, the showers can't be enclosed, there are too many kids on suicide watch, so it's just semi enclosed. I didn't care what they called it. I shower alone and they let me mostly. I crossed my legs as I sat on the benches waiting for the last person to finish and file out.

"In you go, Gerard," Ben called.

I looked at him with a face of confusion. He knew I went last. I always went last. Last meant that twerp of a new kid had to go before me, otherwise I wouldn't be last. I shrugged, remaining defiant.

"Everyone's gone," he said. "You're last."

I frowned and glanced in the showers myself. Sure enough. It was empty. Where did that new kid get to then? I certainly hadn't seen him in there. I couldn't help but wonder if there was a reason why the new kid had to shower separately. I was washing myself, only really putting in a half hearted effort when Ben interrupted me. I went bright red but he ignored my apparent lack of clothing and leant on one of the walls separating the showers.

"I need to ask a favour," Ben said, in a *very* serious tone. You see that's not normal. He's usually very easy going and light hearted but now he wasn't.

I switched off the shower, giving him my full attention. Anything to get myself a leg up in this place. He held out a towel and I wrapped it around my waist and stood watching him, waiting.

"You know the new boy? Frank?"

Ahhh, his name was Frank. Interesting. I nodded affirmatively.

"We all thought he would be petrified of you when he saw you." Ben chuckled at my offended face. "But he's not that scared, something we're all very surprised about, considering the reason he's in here. No, I can't tell you. That's personal. But we'd rather he'd hang around with you, rather than Ray or any of the other guys, okay? He's still scared of you, but at least he's attempting to make friends." At that I took a step forward and shook my head violently in protest. I didn't want friends. I didn't need friends. I would not make a friend out of this kid. Ben looked saddened. "You don't have to be his friend, Gerard," he said angrily. "As much as it would help him, if you simply can't do a simple thing like that, don't bother." Ashamed, I downcast my eyes. "You're really are as cold as they say, aren't you?" Without waiting for an answer he squared his jaw and marched out.

Yes, I am that cold. People like me can't have friends. People like me can't let people get in close. People like me don't need friends. Just think of what would happen if I had friends. Doesn't he realise how fatal that would be to me? I watched him leave, feeling as guilty as shit. As I left the shower I made it my personal mission to find out what it was that landed Frank in here with me.

And I Don't Know What To Do; You're Beautiful

Chapter Summary

Update 2025: changing Frank's age to 18

I was expecting a whole number of things other than what I found when I broke into the records room. I found his file easily and skimmed over it. All the medical stuff wasn't really of any interest to me because it didn't really tell me why he was in here. It told me what was wrong with him. He had some form of trauma induced social phobia and mild case of obsessive compulsive disorder, to put it simply. I dug deeper into his file determined to find out what that trauma was. I read a police report, a therapists report and a psychological evaluation from his psychiatrist. From just the words of a few cold hearted professionals I managed to piece together (whilst also assuming a lot of things) the last tragic six months of his life.

Turns out he had been befriended by two boys, or men, both in their early twenties, the eldest being 24, six years older than Frank was at the time. The two boys gave him a sense of reprieve from his normal social outcast life. They took him under their wing and introduced him to a whirlwind world of drugs and violence. The sex, however, came later when they both raped him in the eldest boy's car. Then, as though nothing had happened they sent him home, promising to see him the next day. The next morning when they saw him again, they did it again. Then they both took off; they had gotten what they wanted. Frank was too scared and ashamed to tell anyone because he believed it was his fault, as most rape victims do. He thought he couldn't tell anyone because they wouldn't believe him because he thought boys can't be raped. He kept it inside for months where it festered. He became fanatical with the fact that he was 'dirty' and developed the need to wash all the time. It got worse and worse, until his parents began to notice. I felt a surge of hatred toward Frank's parents. They must have been completely ignorant to not notice their son having multiple showers and that he was afraid to interact with other human beings. They confronted him and he had a complete breakdown. They, unintentionally, made him realise the full extent of what had happened.

He thought it was ridiculously ironic that the one thing his parents were completely against had occurred and he began laughing. His

laughter soon morphed into an insane, hysterical laughter. He retreated from society, afraid that everyone was out to hurt him. Once in the hospital the laughter dissolved into an uncontrollable rage, and then into hysterical weeping. Everyone was afraid he had lost his mind and he was forced into therapy where they discovered he had been sexually assaulted. When the therapy proved pointless, considering his mental state, he was admitted into a minimum security mental institution. It was in here that they hoped he could begin to actually get better. All that and they weren't actually sure of how suicidal he currently was and they didn't want to risk anything. With parents so rich I thought they had taken the easy, coward's way out by committing their son to a mental institution. But they were the kind of people that considered because they lived in such high society, it would be socially unacceptable to have a son who'd been raped and who'd had a mental breakdown. Hell, they even had to come to grips with the fact that their son had had sex (as unwilling as it was) with a *man!*

As I stacked his folder away I felt a real sick feeling develop in my stomach. The kid had a point – no one really thinks boys or men could be raped. I just couldn't understand why he would want to talk to me. I understood why Ben thought Frank would be scared of me – I was close to the age of the two rapists. But I couldn't push the feeling that there was something more too why he spoke to me this morning. I left the office and shut the door, unable to push the nauseous feeling from my stomach. Poor kid, now I knew why he had such sad eyes and why there was no love on his face. I was right too (actually, when am I not?) – his lips did tell of a tragedy.

I felt consumingly guilty when I saw Frank the next morning. I had slept badly; my thoughts were plagued with what had happened to Frank. I thought about it so much I almost forgot about the people who were after me. It seemed for once I had something else to stress over, instead of my usual problems.

During breakfast I sat, playing mindlessly with my food. I had cornflakes and spent the entire session prodding them with my spoon trying to make them stay under the surface. After the pitiful serving of milk had reduced my cornflakes to a mere yellow soggy mess I pulled my sketch pad back out. I was now more determined than ever to finish my picture of Frank. I had just started when Ben called my name and I reluctantly packed my book away and followed him to the weekly group therapy session they *forced* us all to attend. We pulled our uncomfortable plastic chairs into a circle and sat, watching each other carefully. Ben, I noticed, sat right next to Frank. I scored a seat

directly opposite Frank. Our therapy leader was a shrink called Dr. Markman. She was nice but she never let up on asking us 'how do you feel about that'?

"Welcome," Markman said pleasantly, "to our newest group member, Frank." There was a murmur of hellos that strongly reminded me of an alcoholic's anonymous meeting. Markman decided to leave Frank alone for a while and began on Ray, asking him how he thought he had been over the last week.

I tuned out of Ray's rant. I'd heard his last message already. Ray was convinced some higher being was sending him messages. He also took the liberty of repeating every message to me. But with Ray, you hear one message and you've heard them all. They were all the same really, just different wordings. I sat silently, staring unobviously at Frank who was in turn staring at Ray a look of mild distaste and incredulity on his face. He glanced at me but I flicked my gaze away before he could confirm that I really was staring at him.

We went around the circle and as it came to my turn I shook my head and pretended to become intensely interested in my fingernails. So, as usual, I was skipped and we were forced to endure Lisa's emotional recount of the week. After she finished Markman jumped to Frank. He glanced up and shot her an imploring look.

"How was your first week, Frank?" she asked, looking too attentive for my liking. Frank shrugged non-committedly. "Come on," she prompted.

"It was shit!" he snarled, shocking me. "I shouldn't be here."

Markman was surprised but also slightly pleased. Obviously, she was glad to be getting some emotional response from Frank. "Now, Frank."

"Everyone is so weird. They actually have things wrong with them! I'm not sick. I'm fine. I want to get out of here. You need to tell my parents I'm fine!"

"Hey!" Ray cried. "You are too weird! You take, like, three showers a day, for hours at a time. You won't touch anyone and no one's allowed to touch you. And you wear makeup. That's weird in itself!"

"I can't help needing to shower!" Frank exploded, standing up. "You don't know what it's like. You can't even begin to understand!" Frank sat back down heavily and hid his face in his hands.

I felt the nauseous feeling in my stomach increase tenfold and felt my heart begin to beat very wildly. As I stared at Frank I felt an overwhelming sensation flood my body. It seemed to run through my veins and caused tingling in my digits. The excess of blood made me feel slightly light-headed. But inside I felt this strange thing. The only way I could describe it was that it was like a strange wave of something cascading through my body. It was a feeling, an emotion, but I didn't think I had ever felt it before. It was unusual, and I hated it when I didn't know what was going on. The fact that it was occurring *in my own body* made me considerably more anxious.

"It's okay, Frank, we can talk about it later, privately," Markman said.

Frank surprised us all even more by starting to laugh. "You think we can just talk about it?" he said incredulously. "I can't just talk about it and expect it to get better." He turned to Ray. "You wanna know why I shower for hours all the time? Because I feel dirty. I am dirty!"

I didn't like Frank speaking about himself like that. I wanted to slap him and tell him to stop speaking like that but I couldn't. It was too much of a risk. I just couldn't. The great wave inside of me was brewing to a dangerous level and was threatening to break.

"No matter how much I shower I still feel dirty! I can scrub my body until its red raw and let the water run over me for hours but nothing works. I'm so dirty. Inside and out. I can't get clean!" Frank was becoming very hysterical now.

Markman was pondering. I, however, was stressing and felt close to a heart attack. This strange feeling engulfing my body was so foreign and it was sending unfamiliar thoughts into my head which were going straight to my tongue. I had to cover my mouth. Not because I was shocked but because I was scared of what I was going to blurt out.

"Shhh, Frank, its okay. We don't have to talk about it here. Calm down, its okay." Markman was trying to regain control of the situation.

"So dirty! And so ugly! I am ugly. What was I thinking? Who would ever want to hang out with a loser like me?"

Markman sat forward, intensely interested. "You're feeling betrayed, Frank?"

Everyone else in the group was bewildered. They didn't know why

Frank felt dirty. But I did, and for once, I wished I was as ignorant as them. I wished I didn't know. I so desperately wished I was as unaware as them.

"Yes, I feel fucking betrayed!" Frank screamed. "I was so fucking ugly in the first place and now I'm worse! No one will ever be able to love me. Don't you see? I just want to get clean!"

My breathing was becoming impaired now. Frank was crouched on the floor, sobbing quietly. Ben was at a loss and for once, so was Markman. The great wave inside of me had swelled to a size of dangerous proportions. I uncrossed my legs and sat forward in my seat, sweat running down my back. I knew I shouldn't do it. I couldn't do it, but my heart was screaming at me, screaming louder than the protests in my head. The room was silent, bar Frank's quiet sobbing. My palms were sweating and the room was becoming unbearably hot. My throat was constricting. I felt like I was trapped in a tiny room with a thousand bouncy balls that were making the room a source of frenzied activity. Except the tiny room was my head and the balls were words and thoughts and warnings. Half of the balls were telling – no, screaming at – me to shut the hell up and relax. They were telling me it wasn't worth it. Discovery was a much worse fate than the negative thoughts of a kid I barely knew. But then again, the other half was begging me to open my mouth and say it. I leant forward realising that what I was about to do could potentially be my downfall. And that was scaring me shitless.

"I don't think you're ugly. I think you're beautiful."

Inside, the wave crashed. The words sounded better in my head than they did when I spoke them. And I seriously was regretting them. Not what I said. I believed completely what I said. I was just realising maybe it was a mistake to speak at all. There was a bang and a collective gasp echoed through the circle. Then the silence deepened to an eerie level. I glanced at Ben. He was on the ground. He had fallen off his chair in shock. That's what the bang was. And, yes, I mean literally. Ben, literally, fell off his chair and was currently sitting on the floor staring at me with a look of complete and utter shock etched across his face. Markman was a little more dignified but I could tell she too was close to falling off her chair.

"Gerard?" she said in a hushed tone.

I was only vaguely aware of all this going on around me. My eyes and ears were on Frank. He was staring up at me too, but not in shock and

he wasn't staring at me as though I had sprouted a dinosaur head on my shoulder. He was staring up at me with sad eyes that, I noticed, sparkled a tiny little bit.

I suddenly didn't regret the words anymore.

"Gerard?" The shock in her voice was undisguised.

I turned to face Markman. She probably had so many questions she was dying to ask. Those words, the ones I had spoken to Frank, were, after all, the first words I had ever spoken in therapy. That was the first time I had spoken over two years. I had broken my silence for Frank. Just because I already knew Frank was beautiful. And I knew that it was my responsibility, even under threat of discovery, to ensure that of all people, Frank *had* to be the main person who knew and understood that.

He Poured His Heart Right Out Through His Eyes

Have you ever crouched down in front of a fish tank and gotten eye to eye with a goldfish? It just stares back at you and opens and closes its mouth, making a 'gloop' like noise. Well, obviously you can't hear the 'gloop' noise but I know that's the kind of noise it's trying to make. If you could hear underwater, that is the sound you will hear. But, to the point, that's the only way to describe how everyone was looking at me, Markman especially. She was the one opening and closing her mouth in shock. I was almost expecting to hear the 'gloop' noise and was slightly disappointed when I didn't.

I turned away to read the clock and was pleased to note it was precisely four minutes until three o'clock. At three o'clock this stupid group therapy session ended and it was free time. I settled back in my chair and folded my arms, avidly watching the clock. Because I could, I began to count the seconds. It irritated me that the clock was faulty. For every minute, the clock only counted 59 seconds. It was one whole second out. Jeez, that means every hour, the clock misses a cumulative of sixty seconds. This clock has been there for years. Christ, I can't imagine how much time it had been losing all these months.

If every minute lost one second, it therefore meant every hour was sixty seconds out, or one minute. Every day lost a total of twenty-four minutes, and every week it lost 168 minutes. Shit, that meant that in one year (I quickly calculated in my head) it was a total of 8736 minutes out. That means for the two years, six months, twelve days, eleven hours and thirty-four minutes I have been forced to dwell in this fucking place I have lost over –

"Gerard!" I jumped violently, my train of thought rudely interrupted.

Scowling, I rotated my neck and looked at Markman, exasperated. Thankfully she had composed herself and was no longer staring at me like a stupefied goldfish. Good thing too; she had looked rather foolish. I raised an eyebrow in question. She considered me for a moment then looked to Frank. I rolled my eyes and sighed, annoyed. I slumped down in my seat, folding my arms tightly across my chest, waiting for her to return her attention to me.

I glanced at the clock again. It was exactly three o'clock. Excellent.

Time to make an exit. I leapt up and stalked from the room. I was so glad to get out of there. I now knew what an animal in a zoo or aquarium felt like. The staring, unblinking eyes were quite unnerving after a while.

I had walked less than ten metres from the doorway when:

CRASH!!

I jumped in fright and spun to face the direction the noise had come from. It took a second for me to register that I was facing the west wing. The west wing of this place was the oldest and weakest, compared to the rest of the facility. It was the perfect place for *them* to break in. I had been discovered. I knew I shouldn't have opened my mouth. They tracked my voice and now they had come to collect. And they would not fail. I took a fearful, half-step backwards. I felt the fear well up in my throat. I gasped for air, my airway closing in terror. I had to force myself to keep walking backwards. I tried to turn and run but my body had seized up painfully.

Everyone ran out from different rooms and stood around me, staring in the direction of the west wing. However, they didn't know what they were watching for, like I did.

Ben frowned, unable to work out what had made the noise. He began to walk toward the corridor that would eventually lead to the west wing. Zach joined him and they strode down the corridor and then disappeared as they rounded the corner. I tried to warn them but it went unnoticed.

I started thinking about the needles. Hundreds of them. I began to imagine their metal tips being pressed into my skin and depositing all manner of drugs into my bloodstream and muscles. Then I thought about the countless blood tests, experiments and assessments. I will suffer greatly as they struggle to keep me alive with ever watchful machines and pumps. The metal clamps and chains will keep me in place as they inflict unimaginable pain on my already bruised and broken body. They will try to make me tell them. They will try so hard. They will try to force me to tell them all my secrets. But I will never let them know. So they will force their way in with saws and knives. The terrifyingly razor-sharp scalpels will slice open my head and they will take the secrets from my brain. Then, the world will end.

Ben and Zach returned. They both trudged back to the group,

strangely wet. I looked them up and down, alarmed.

“Damn roof collapsed,” Zach muttered shaking out his sopping wet boots. “Bloody rain caused the supports to fall in.”

Rain? *Rain*? RAIN! Not *them*! Just rain! Wait! I didn’t notice it was raining. I hoped to God Zach was right. Wait, no, he must be because I would’ve known if they were here by now. I probably wouldn’t be standing here gawking at Ben and Zach if *they* were somewhere in the facility. I heaved a huge sigh of relief. I had never actually thought about what I would do if they did ever come for me. But now that it had been a very real possibility I had gone blank. I don’t think my mind had ever gone blank before in my entire life. But that’s what fear does to you. I couldn’t move and I couldn’t think. I would’ve been a sitting duck if it had been *them*. I am never not in control. I never not notice if it’s raining. See what this damn kid is doing to me?

Once the news of the collapsed roof had spread throughout the group everyone wandered off. It wasn’t that interesting anymore. I didn’t leave. I stayed where I was, staring at nothing in particular. I ran my hands over my head, double checking that my brain was still there. Several security guards joined the small gathering. I hadn’t seen them inside the building in months. They usually just patrolled the outside making sure no one escaped or ran away. Ben, Zach, the guards and some other people I hadn’t seen before huddled into a group. I frowned, obviously excluded from their little meeting. I took a half-step backward and turned around to face Frank.

At first I thought he was staring at me, but that was just my vanity talking. He was actually staring helplessly down the corridor. It took a second for me to realise that of course Frank’s room was located in the west wing. His room was literally three steps from the showers. I know because I saw his room number on his file and I knew this place inside out. He looked down the corridor for another long minute before he walked away, looking oddly morbid. That kid really confused me.

I walked to my table and sat down, thinking hard about everything that had happened in the last ten minutes.

“Gerard, Gerard! Hey!” I had barely been alone a minute when Ray came up to me and plonked himself down at my table. I cringed. He can be really, really infuriating. I kept my head down, pointedly ignoring him. “I didn’t know you could speak,” he said amazed.

I think that even a day-old foetus with no brain or mental capacity would be able to tell that I was pissed off and wanted to be left alone. This brain-dead foetus would even catch onto the fact that I was purposely ignoring them. But then again, sometimes, Ray's mental capacity is less than that of a brain-dead, day-old foetus.

"I so wasn't expecting you to speak, you know? I got a right shock. I heard this voice that I'd never heard before and it took me ages to realise that it was you. Why, Gerard? Why did you say that to Frank? Did you mean it? Do you like him? Do you *like* like him? More than a friend?"

I felt the fury building up inside of me. I ripped my sketch book out and flipped it savagely to a blank page. I pressed my pencil to the page so hard the sharp point snapped. I wrote in angry block letters: GET LOST! I even underlined it twice to get the point across.

I think it was the double underline that made Ray realise. Good thing I decided to put them in or else Ray could've thought we were playing hide and seek, the idiot. I didn't look up at him once. I am good at ignoring people. I'm very good at ignoring people. I would so win the national award for superior ignoring, if such a thing existed.

"Gerard? Might we have a private word, please?" Ignoring Markman was a lot harder than ignoring Ray. I tried. I tried so hard. But she was a lot more persistent than Ray. I nudged the note I had shown Ray forward slightly, indicating what I wanted. Now I wished I hadn't underlined it twice. Now two underlines made me look like a rude, arrogant ass.

Wait! I was a rude, arrogant ass, wasn't I?

Markman leant in closer so no one except I could hear what she was saying. "Go to my office now." Her tone meant she was dead serious. I glanced up and stared straight into her eyes, daring her to ask me again. I wouldn't go. I would not go.

"Go, or you know what. Don't think I won't do it," she threatened and I believed her.

I know I said I wouldn't go. But she was blackmailing me. Fucking blackmail. The corrupt bitch. I slammed my fists on the table, defeated. I gave her a look of the utmost loathing and stalked away from the table toward her office.

I wasn't really angry at her. And she wasn't really angry at me. We

have a sort of love-hate relationship. I know she loves me. Not that kind of love though. More so, I 'intrigue' her, as she once said. I don't mind her. But of course she doesn't believe me. She thinks that *they* are a figment of my imagination. But she's wrong. They're real, whether she's going to admit it or not.

I banged the door open, hoping to annoy Markman but instead scaring the shit out of Frank. He leapt to his feet when he saw me and took a hesitant step backwards. I frowned and turned to Markman who had caught up to me. I raised an eyebrow, questioning Frank's presence. She gave me an exasperated look and quickly moved into the room. I swear she keeps that look especially for me. If looks had a name that look will most certainly be dubbed the 'Gerard' look considering she seems to only use it on me. Yes, in fact I will name it myself. It shall be called the 'Gerard glare'.

"Don't go, Frank. I wanted you both here," Markman said coaxing Frank to sit back down. She managed to get him re-seated and then directed her attention back to me.

Ooh, that's another 'Gerard glare'. I will count them. One.

"Come sit," she said.

Two.

I wondered what would happen if I decided to run away. It would be hell funny if she decided to run after me. In those shoes, I would be halfway to Timbuktu before she could walk two steps. Oh, that's the Australian Timbuktu, by the way. Just in case you were wondering.

Oh, another look. Three.

I sauntered over to the plush leather chair and ungracefully sat down. These expensive chairs were the only reason I liked coming to this office. Compared to the hard, plastic, moulded, uncomfortable, bolted down furniture of the rest of this place, it was heaven. I made myself comfortable, tucking my legs up under my bottom. Markman made a disapproving noise that reverberated from her throat, but made no actual comment about my feet on her furniture.

Four.

She cleared her throat.

Five.

“I gathered you both here because of what occurred during the group therapy. Do you both remember?” Markman asked.

I hastily fumbled in my inner jacket pocket for my sketch pad and a pencil. I flipped to a blank page. Man, I was going through these blank pages lately. I think I’m gonna need a new book soon.

‘No.’ I wrote quickly. ‘In the half an hour since the group therapy my memory has strangely gone blank. I think I should leave. I am obviously of no use in this conversation.’ I slid it across the desk. I could see Frank reading it also. Markman read it and pursed her lips.

Six.

Two things happened straight after and both I was not expecting. I had expected Markman to go off. She goes off at me a lot. I have received more lectures and preachings than all of her others patients combined. But she didn’t. She just gave me a look and then looked away. She had this weird look on her face. It was almost like disappointment. The other thing I wasn’t expecting was Frank’s laugh. It wasn’t a full-blown laugh or even a chuckle. It was more like a ‘humph’. You know, the kind of noise you make when something is amusing but isn’t worth a giggle? I glanced sideways at him, mystified. He had this slight smile on his face. Did he just laugh at something I said? Is he actually capable of smiling? I think he may be.

And I must say. He does look very good when he smiles. Even if it was just a tiny little curl of the lip. His face seems to light up. You know, come to life. I don’t really know, but when he smiles my heart suddenly begins to beat a little faster and that strange wave begins to form again inside of me.

I made to get up; to follow through on my statement of my unnecessary presence in this room.

Seven.

I sat back down. This time the look was pretty severe. I think she was getting pretty angry now.

Her attention was diverted from me as her blackberry went off. She looked embarrassed and apologised but still proceeded to look at the message anyway.

She groaned and tapped out a reply.

“Half the rooms in the west wing are completely water damaged,” she told us both. “Including yours, Frank.”

Frank didn’t really react. In fact, he looked slightly nauseated.

“It’s okay,” he breathed.

“We don’t have any rooms free,” she continued regretfully. “We may have to transfer you.”

Frank sat forward, alarmed. I leant forward too. I didn’t want Frank to leave. I don’t know why. I just wanted him around. If he transferred I would probably never see him again. That made me quite distressed.

Although it killed me to admit it and it was extraordinarily hard to put on paper I wrote in small, precise letters:

‘He can’t leave. He can stay in my room’.

I slid it across the table to Markman, careful this time to not let Frank see it. At first I think she was disappointed that I didn’t speak.

The look on her face was priceless. I watched her as she read what I had written. She looked absolutely floored. She even started to do the goldfish thing again.

“Gerard. Y-y-you don’t have to. You know that? No one’s asking you.”

I nodded. Yeah, I knew. She slid the paper back and I wrote: ‘I want to.’

Markman considered me for a very long time. I think Frank caught on to what was going on because he was looking back and forth between us, seeking further enlightenment.

She turned to him. “Gerard has offered to share his room until we can fix your old room, Frank.”

He bit his lip and gazed at me through those beautiful hazel orbs.

“Really?” he whispered.

I nodded. “Yes,” I mouthed.

“Okay.” I had to strain to hear the soft reply.

Markman’s blackberry was out again and she quickly typed or wrote –

whatever – a message to an unknown recipient. Well known to her, unknown to me. She stood back up and gestured for Frank to do the same. When I moved to copy them she shook her head.

Eight.

“Wait.” That was all she said before her and Frank left the room.

I poked my tongue at her back and earnt a stifled snicker from Frank. Again, that was twice in ten minutes that I’d managed to pry a flicker of happiness from Frank and his broken heart, body and mind.

I started snooping around Markman’s desk, looking for something, anything, interesting but there was nothing. On her desk were a lot of papers but none that had any relevance to me. There was also a photo of a young girl, but I didn’t know who she was. I wondered if she was Markman’s daughter. I knew they weren’t biologically related – they looked nothing alike.

“Do you not have any ounce of self-control or common sense, Gerard?” Markman snapped, busting me searching through her things.

Nine.

I pointed to the picture of the young girl.

“None of your business,” she replied, brushing the matter aside. “Take a seat.”

I sat back down and titled my head, watching her expectantly.

“Are you doing this to be spiteful or do you have a heart?” she said, coming straight out with the burning question.

I feigned hurt and pretended to act offended. I sniffed haughtily and folded my arms.

“Is there something going on between you and Frank?” she asked carefully.

I shook my head. I pulled the paper closer to the edge of the desk and picked up the pencil. As I was writing Markman asked, “Why did you speak to Frank?”

I wrote: ‘Nothing is going on. Don’t stress your weak little heart. I had to speak. He was tearing himself apart.’

She read it and nodded. “You know what happened to him?” she asked.

I nodded.

In big, glaring block letters I wrote one word: ‘RAPE’.

Ten.

She made a ‘tsk’ noise. “You sneak, Gerard. That was private and confidential. Do you want Frank to read your file?”

Ha! Even if Frank wanted to read my file, he couldn’t. It wasn’t in with all the others. I checked. In fact, I turned that whole room upside down just looking for it. I know the files in that room were just copies of the originals. The originals were in Markman’s office. The originals I couldn’t get to. That exceedingly annoyed me. What was so shocking that they couldn’t make a copy of my file?

I wrote: ‘My file isn’t in there. I checked. Where is it?’

“I don’t think you want to read your file,” Markman said softly.

I rolled my eyes and placed the graphite back to the paper. I put in writing my strong desire: ‘I think I do!’

“Are you concerned about Frank because he reminds you of someone?” Markman asked suddenly. She had been brooding for a while. “Another boy, around the same age?”

I shook my head. I didn’t know another boy around the same age. I had been stuck here for the past two and a half years. I only knew the people who come and go.

Markman took a deep, unsteady breath. She rubbed her eyes, smudging her mascara. “Has this got anything to do with *them*?”

I pretended to think for a while. I tapped my chin as though I was deep in thought. I leant forward and wrote: ‘Everything is to do with them.’

I think after I wrote that we sat in silence for a very long time. Not just the usual few seconds, I’m talking minutes. Markman looked like she was at her wits end. I didn’t make any sounds anyway so basically it was silence on her part. I was silent all the time.

“Gerard, you’ve been here a long time.”

No shit, Sherlock! You think I don't fucking know I've been here a long time? I didn't just sleep through the whole 30 months, you know!

"A lot of the staff trust you. They trust you more than any of the other patients."

I know! I am like, the king of this place. No, not really.

"I think you're starting to abuse that trust."

Ahhhhh, what? What gives you that idea?

"I do think you're trustworthy. But I think in some aspects you aren't."

Like what?

"Especially when it comes to medication."

I seriously think Markman can read my mind. She says something and I answer in my head and she seems to know what I'm thinking. Freaky.

"I want to try something new."

I rolled my eyes. Here we go.

"I'd like to change your medication. You understand you're on a drug called Navane?"

I concurred by nodding my head.

"I want to try a different medication. It's called Clozapine. I think you will respond well to it. However, it does have a few side effects. I want to make you aware that Clozapine has led to the development of agranulocytosis in some patients."

A-gran – u – what? She wasn't really making much sense.

"Agranulocytosis is a significant suppression of the white blood cell count in your body. It can be life-threatening. Because of the lowered white blood cells it means your body is compromised in its ability to fight infections. So once you go on this drug you must tell us if you start to notice the early signs of infection, okay?"

No, it wasn't okay. I didn't want to die because of some stupid drug. I'm not sick. I don't care what you say. No drugs can fix me. Nothing else worked, why would this? Maybe it's time you accepted that I

can't be fixed, simply because I'm not broken.

I folded my arms, knowing there was more. There was always more.

"Because of the risk of agranulocytosis, you will have to undergo weekly blood tests to monitor your white blood cell count," Markman said very, very quickly.

Awww, hell no! I hate needles. There ain't no fucking way you're gonna stick me with a needle very week. No, no, no!

I wrote a very large 'NO!' on the paper and ripped it off. I threw it at Markman and tucked my sketch book back into my pocket. Then I walked out. For once, she didn't try to stop me.

***

"Lights out!" The shrill, institution-worthy voice echoed down the halls and managed to seep in under the crack at the bottom of my room's door.

I swear they treat us like two year olds in this place. Man, what I would give to be able to control that damn light switch myself.

The lights flicked off, sending the room into an eerie darkness, illuminated only by a few rays of moonlight that flittered in through the reinforced glass windows high above our heads.

I heard Frank shuffle into a comfortable position but otherwise heard nothing from him before I fell asleep. I always fall asleep straightaway. I never had anyone to talk to. Not that I talk anyway.

Something woke me up that night. I thought it was exceedingly strange that I woke up at my own accord in the middle of the night. I never wake up. I always, always sleep through the night. I was like a mother's dream true. I never need to pee or anything like that. Which was why when I woke up, I thought it was morning. But I quickly realised it was still night when there wasn't the ripples on the wall. You see, the early morning sun comes in through the window, and the reinforced glass has a strange glaze to it which makes a ripple pattern on the wall across from me. Some months the light coming in is absolutely brilliant and can be blinding. But at other times of the year, it's dull and gloomy. That's because of the seasons, you see.

I lay in the darkness for a while, annoyed and sleepy. Then I heard a noise. My ears pricked up. I couldn't tell what the noise was but I sure

as hell wanted to know. I heard it again. I slowly rolled over, away from the wall so I was looking over in Frank's direction. He was awake. I couldn't see his face, he was facing the wall. But I knew he was awake. I wondered for a moment if he had heard the noise as well.

I heard it again. This time I was able to identify it. As the realisation swept over me like a wave I felt sick again.

Frank was crying.

Not just crying though. Weeping. He was trying his hardest to cry silently and was per se except for a few deep shuddery breaths and chokes. Now I knew what I was listening for I heard everything.

I heard the uneven and erratic gasps for air and the painful choking noises as he struggled to keep it all inside. He was trying to hide it from me. He was ashamed to cry in front of me but by the looks of it, couldn't hold it in much longer.

A sob escaped next, hurriedly silenced. I continued to watch him quietly, waiting to see what he would do. He struggled to keep any noises from escaping for a good five minutes before finally turning his head into his pillow and letting go. Even though the pillow muffled the sounds, they were still identifiable.

As I lay listening to him I felt like I was intruding. But I didn't know what to do. He was trying to hide his crying from me, so it would humiliate him if I acknowledged it. But every one of Frank's sobs stabbed me right in the heart.

Frank's sob were flowing freely now. It was real pain. It was the sound of real, heartbreaking emotional pain leaving his body.

I couldn't stand it any longer. I couldn't stand Frank doing this to us both any longer. I silently slipped out of my bed and made my way to his bed. I crouched down and whispered his name. His sobs ceased immediately. He went as rigid as a board and then slowly turned to look at me.

I was right; the humiliation was evident on his face.

"Go away," he said, struggling to keep it inside again.

Although he had stopped making noises, the tears were still flowing freely. The small drops of salty water ran in rivers down his cheeks

and sparkled in the moonlight. His eyes were hidden in darkness but I knew they would be red and puffy.

I had never seen anyone like this before. So raw. So in pain.

Maybe he wanted to talk? I mimed talking. I couldn't think of any words that would be worthy of being spoken in such an awkward situation.

"Why do *you* want to talk? You never talk anyway!" he choked out in such a harsh voice I was shocked.

But I wasn't about to give in. I sat down on the ground, making myself comfortable. "It's not that I don't talk," I whispered. "It's just that I always listen."

The sobs simply erupted after that. The soul-wrenching, heart-binding sobs that stabbed me like a knife. I reached out and touched his arm gently through the sheets. I was touching him, but in another sense I wasn't. His hand shot out and he gripped mine tightly. We were holding hands, but the sheet separated us and prevented our hands from properly touching. I had found a way around his fear of touching others and letting others touch him. He pulled his and my hand up to his face, trying to hide. He clenched his eyes shut and wept so hard it actually hurt me. But now I realised, I wasn't trying to make him better or prevent him from crying. I was simply here to *help* him cry.

I held his hand through the sheets for so long. The minutes seemed to slip away into nothing. What surprised me the most was the amount of tears he shed. I could see them sliding down his cheeks and over his jaw. Some ran down the side of his nose and others into his mouth. I have never seen anyone cry so many tears. It was almost like he was pouring his heart and his soul right out through his eyes.

Thankfully though I was here to catch them and maybe, one day, I would be the one to help put them back in.

We can't all be heroes; somebody has to sit on the sides and clap as they go by

"Back! Pass it back! I'm back if you need me! Shoot! Aim for the corner! Go, go, go! The corner, Gerard! Nice try! Stay in sit, Gerard!"

I coughed violently as a wave of water swamped me. I sculled the water madly with my hands, struggling to keep my head above the fluctuating waves. The ball sailed over my head and landed in front of a player from the opposition. He swept it in between his arms and began to swim with his head above the water. The smooth and highly defined muscles in his shoulders and back flexed as his powerful arms sliced easily through the water. My legs moved in a lazy egg-beater kick as I watched the ball get passed around down the other end of the pool and cheered as our goal-keeper deflected the ball. I got ready to move as our captain scooped the ball up in his hand and propelled it with amazing force toward me. I raised my hand to catch it, confident in my ability.

It was coming directly for me. Then the next thing I knew I was underwater, a powerful hand pushing down on my left shoulder. I fought against it, but my opponent held firm. It didn't look like he was going to let me go. I kicked out at his crotch and got the result I so desperately needed. As my head broke the surface I saw the game had moved back to the other end of the pool. Nobody was watching me. Nobody seemed to be concerned that I had almost drowned. My opponent was several metres away, holding his crotch and struggling to stay afloat.

I spun around wildly, my head spinning from lack of oxygen. That's when I saw the others. There were two boys, both about the same age. They were both wearing blue caps, like me. We were on the same team but I didn't recognise them. They saw me looking and they both cried out to me. Two huge men twice their size appeared behind them and pulled them under. Their cries were abruptly cut off as they disappeared under the surface. I kicked out, intent on saving them but fell victim to the same fate. I swallowed a mouthful of water as I went under and couldn't gasp for any air. My white-capped opponent held onto my own cap tightly, clenching it in his fist. I fumbled with the knot under my chin and undid it hastily. I swam down and away from the evil white cap, toward the two boys who were kicking and thrashing wildly. The boy on the right saw me undo my cap and mimicked me, escaping the clutches of his attacker. I realised who he was then.

It was Frank.

The cap had hidden his hair and made him almost unrecognisable. We both swam toward each other. My lungs were bursting for air but I couldn't bring myself to leave either of them. The other boy managed to get his cap off but his attacker held him under the water by the neck. I didn't know who the other boy was.
Frank swam toward me and I grabbed him, pulling him toward me with all the force I could muster. We broke the surface together, gasping desperately for air. I whipped my body around in the water searching for the other kid. He hadn't broken the surface with us. Terrified for him I went underwater again seeking him. His fingers scrabbled weakly at the wrist of his attacker but with no avail. He saw me and with every ounce of strength he screamed: "GERARD!"

***

"Are you okay?"

I clutched my chest as it moved up and down rapidly, sucking in precious air. I was panting as though I had swum a mile non-stop and without taking enough breaths. I pushed wet hair out of my face. My hair and clothes were soaked with sweat. I blinked several times, realising I wasn't in the pool in the middle of a vicious water polo game. I was in my bed waking up from a nightmare.

There were two things wrong with that. For one, I do not have nightmares. I have never had a nightmare. I don't even dream at night. I know that sounds weird but I am weird like that. I don't dream – and I most certainly do not have nightmares.
The second thing was the water polo. I don't know how to play water polo. I have never played water polo in my life. I don't think I have ever watched a game on television. How on earth did I know how to play? Oh and who the fuck plays water polo anyway?

"Are you okay?" Frank repeated anxiously.

I sat up and realised why my body ached so much. I wasn't in my bed; I was on the floor between my bed and Frank's bed.

I nodded and slowly got to my feet, stretching my sore muscles tenderly. I heard my back crick and moaned. Note to self: do not sleep on the floor.

Frank watched me for a while then he nodded and left the room. He turned right. He was going to take a shower. I knew he was.

I sat on the edge of my bed and pondered over this dream. I recognised Frank, but did not know who the second boy was *at all*. It wasn't that I knew his face but couldn't place his name. It was as though he was a complete stranger and I'd never seen his before in my life ever. But that couldn't be right. I know how dreams work. A dream is, put simply, your subconscious running back over itself. Some scientists try and tell us that a dream is your brain's way of discarding useless memories but I know that is *not* how memories work. You cannot not just *discard* a memory or throw it out like a piece of trash. Sure, you can lose them or misplace them and even store them. But you *cannot* discard them. That's just foolish. Don't these scientists realise that? Once you make a memory it is in your head for good. If you ever want to get rid of it you need to lose it and lose it well to ensure you never stumble back across it. Gosh, these amateurs have no idea!

But that also means it is illogical for me to have a dream about a boy I'd never met and a game I'd never played.

It didn't make sense. *It just didn't make sense*. It did not make sense! Why didn't any of this make any sense? I think something is wrong with me.

***

"Back! Pass it back! I'm back if you need me! Shoot! Aim for the corner! Go, go, go! The corner, Gerard! Nice try! Stay in sit, Gerard!"

The wave of chlorinated water splashed my face, filling my nose and mouth. I coughed and spluttered, rubbing my irritated eyes. I was treading the water vigorously and blinking non-stop. I rubbed my eyes and blinked blearily. My vision was cloudy but I could see well enough. I could just see my defender from the other team swimming toward me like he had a definite goal in his head. I bet anyone $100 that goal was to prevent me from getting the ball. I turned my head into the water and swam a few strokes to gain some distance between us. When I felt him brush against my foot I spun over and began backstroke so I could keep an eye on him. He took a hold of my leg and dragged me back towards him. I lashed out but it did nothing. He clamped a heavy hand on my shoulder and sent me under. Straight away I saw the two boys. The one on the right was Frank. I recognised him but the second boy was a mystery. I sunk my teeth into my defender's hand and swam away from him. Frank managed to get free by himself and he turned to help the other boy. I joined them but no matter what we did we could not get the other boy free from his attacker.

My lungs were bursting and I couldn't stay under any longer. I swam up for air but when I dived back down again the boy was still being held fast. Frank had disappeared. I searched for him anxiously and saw him. He had drowned. I turned back to the other kid. A few seconds ago he had been kicking feebly but now he was motionless. They had both drowned. I couldn't save either of them.

***

This wasn't right. The dream was the same but then it became very different. In this dream they both drowned. In my first dream I had saved Frank and the other kid had not drowned. I decided to talk to Frank. I wasn't going to tell him what happened in the dream. But I felt I needed to tell someone about the fact I was having these dreams.

"What do you mean you don't dream? Everybody dreams," Frank said.

"*I* don't!" I said, exasperated.

"Well, apparently, you do."

I raised an eyebrow at him and he shrugged, a coy smile playing about on his lips. "Fine." I admitted defeat and walked from our room, grumpy.

I wandered into the cafeteria completely aware that it was early and that I never arrive to breakfast this early. But that stupid dream woke me up and I could not go back to sleep. The cafeteria was empty. Clearly no one else got up this early either. I glanced to the side. They weren't even serving breakfast yet. The roller doors over the counter were still closed and locked.

"Jeez it's a tad early for you, Gerard, isn't it?" Ben laughed as he passed me. He sat down at the closest table and spread the morning paper out. I could smell his coffee from here.

Fuck, I need coffee. I needed *that* coffee.

I casually walked over to Ben and sat down at his table. He looked up at me surprised. Yes, it was out of the ordinary for me to sit at someone else's table but.....uh, it was *coffee,* you know.

He looked where I was staring and chuckled. He wrapped his hand around the cup tighter and pulled it in toward his chest. "You can't have it. Get over it," he said bluntly.

“Please,” I begged.

Ben started in shock. I guess he had every right to. I haven’t really actually spoken to him directly, ever.

“Uh, no! It has caffeine in it.”

Oh, does it? No way? That’s not the reason why I wanted the damn thing in the first place.

"No, you can’t have caffeine, Gerard. You know that.”

Thank you so much for informing me, Ben! You know what job you would do splendidly in? You could be one of those people who you ring up to ask information. You ask them all sorts of questions. You ask them what the exact time it is, or what to do if the condom breaks, or why your lemon meringue pie doesn’t look like the one Jamie Oliver made on TV. They are just *soooo* informative. Ben would fit right in.

After breakfast, it was decided that instead of our usual ‘quiet’ time we would have ‘outside’ time. Oh yay! ‘Outside’ time! Just what I’ve wanted to do for so long. Yeah, I’m so looking forward to going outside and running around. You know what? I may as well ring them up and tell them where I am and what room I’m staying in so they can come and get me. I can’t go outside. That’s like advertising myself to *them*. I am not that stupid.

“Come play, Gerard!” Ray exclaimed, his face flushed. It was still fairly chilly outside so everyone was still wearing coats. His coat was sitting unevenly off his shoulder. Arghh, I just wanted to fix it.

I shook my head and folded my arms. I was staying in my seat. I was touched though that Ray made a special trip inside away from his football game to invite me out. I looked for Frank. He was brave enough to venture outside. I shook my head. Didn’t he know how many germs are airborne? Ray ran back outside.

“You are such a wet blanket.”

Thank you for noticing. I nodded, agreeing with Ben.

“For the first time in months the weather’s been great and the temperatures just perfect and you want to stay inside and sulk?” Ben said slyly.

Normally I would take the bait and make some sort of insulting sign at him but today I couldn't be bothered. I was tired and worried about these dreams. I stared out the window at Frank as he wandered around aimlessly and avoided Ray's wild game of touch football. Well, it was touch football to all the players except Ray. He just crash tackled Zach into the grass. I laughed to myself as Ray was ordered into timeout for five minutes.

"Why don't you go have your shower now?" Ben suggested. "These guys are going to want showers when they finish and you'll have to fight to keep them out."

That was actually a very good idea. Why didn't I think of it?

I nodded sleepily. Maybe a cold shower would wake me up. Since I couldn't have coffee, cold water will have to suffice. Ben walked me to the shower block and unlocked the door. Normally he was supposed to stay with me but no one bothered watching me anymore. Like I said – I'm not going to kill myself. I am still working on the whole meaning of life thing.

I poured the shampoo into my palm and lathered it onto my wet hair. I pulled my hands away and saw several strands of long black hair entwined around my fingers. Great, now I'm moulting. My week just keeps getting better and better.

The shower door swung open just as I was lamenting over my hair and I glanced up, surprised. Ben couldn't be back. No, everyone leaves me alone whilst I'm in the shower.

Frank burst into the shower and by the looks of it he was a man on a mission. He was walking with his hands out, palms facing up. He stopped for a moment and desperately shook his hands. The way he was acting I gathered he had gotten something on his hands to make them dirty. He stripped his shirt off and was about to lose the pants when he looked around and saw me.

His mouth fell open in horror. My mouth fell open in disbelief. Oh my god, Frank has a beautiful body. He instantly moved to cover his torso but couldn't bring himself to let his dirty hands come into contact with his skin. He was staring at me (I was naked, remember?) like a deer caught in headlights. I stared right back at him and couldn't help but notice his eyes drop down. He was so checking me out. I was taken aback. I turned away from him, bemused but not embarrassed. My hair still needed to be rinsed and conditioned; I wasn't going

anywhere. He looked away too, his face burning red. I could see him out of the corner of my eye and was intensely interested to see what he would do. He proceeded to look from his dirty hands, to me and back again. I thought he would walk out. Surely he wouldn't want to be naked around another man after what happened to him?

I shut my eyes to ensure no suds stung them and rinsed my hair. I chickened out and used hot water. Cold water was too much for me to bear in this weather. Once I opened my eyes I was floored to see Frank two showers away washing himself fervently. I stared at him. I know it was wrong. But he was so beautiful. All of him. How could anyone ever hurt something so beautiful? I bet his rapists ripped the wings of butterflies when they were kids. Now I knew what he looked like. My eyes ran over his body eagerly taking in the sight. I memorised every contour and every ripple in his small body instantly. It was wrong and I was exploiting him but I couldn't tear myself away. He was so beautiful.

"Don't look at me!" Frank commanded and I had no choice but to obey.

I took one last look before switching off my own shower, grabbing a towel and disappearing around the corner into the dressing room.

Woe is me. He was such a beautiful disaster.

After our little shower incident, Frank proceeded to ignore me for the next week. He was polite and spoke to me whenever necessary (which wasn't often) but stopped sitting at my table and not even looking at me when we went to bed at night. Every time we made eye contact (which was often) he would go bright red and cause me to then blush. I think what was happening was he would glance at me but look away when I glanced at him and vice versa. But we were both pretty slow and I don't think either of us really wanted to look away so we kept making eye contact.

Over that week I was stressed more than I had ever been. Every single night I had the same dream but it always played out different. The first night they both drowned again, and I did as well. The second night Frank drowned and I drowned. The third night I saved Frank but couldn't save myself. The fourth night I saved myself and Frank. The fifth night I saved myself and Frank again but the other kid drowned.

The only thing that seemed consistent with these dreams is that no matter what I did I could not save the second kid. I tried every possible method but the dream always ended in him drowning or screaming desperately for me to help him.

***

Frank clung to me desperately. “Please help him,” he screamed in my ear as I struggled to keep us both afloat. I nodded. I would save him today. Frank let go of my back and I dived under and swam strongly toward this poor kid. I was angry and placed my foot against his attacker’s chest. I kicked him away with all the strength I could muster. My heel on his breastbone caused him to crumble in and relinquish his grip. I grabbed the kid willingly and swum to the surface with him. I pulled his head above water and dragged him to the side of the pool. As I reached the side of the pool I heard a woman scream. The kid was dragged from my arms by a man above me. I tried to hold on but was no match.

“Oh my god! Michael!” The woman I heard scream clutched the kid’s body to her chest and began weeping.

Wait? The kid was dead? No! I saved him!!! He’s alive.

“Michael! Michael, baby, wake up! It’s mama. Wake up Michael! Please baby, wake up. Open your eyes! What did you do to him?”

The last question was directed at me. I didn’t do anything. I saved him. He was safe now!

“How could you, Gerard? How could you?” The woman’s frantic voice was broken with chokes and sobs.

How could I what? What are you talking about? I saved him. I saved him!

***

"Oh my god! Gerard? Are you okay?” Frank leapt from his bed as I rolled off my own and landed with a bone shattering crash on the floor.

I sat up, looking around feverishly. I had saved him. I had! He was alive. What was that woman talking about? How could I what? I didn’t do anything.

“Dreams again?” Frank asked anxiously. He was crouched beside me and looking extremely concerned.

“I need to talk to Markman,” I gasped.

“You can’t. She’s not seeing anyone today. She has some sort of really important meeting.”

I slowly recovered by breath but my mind was reeling from the outcome of my latest dream. I was scared now. That lady was blaming me for something I didn’t do. Who was that lady? And who the hell is Michael?

For the first time all week Frank and I walked to breakfast together. He walked with me to the cafeteria before he turned and walked back toward the showers. It was nice that he cared a little about me to make sure I got to a place where there were other people. I sat down at my table which was still vacant. Everyone knew not to sit there.

Why couldn’t I save that kid? Maybe if I...no. That wouldn’t work. Perhaps if we swam toward the end with the markers, or towards the shallow end? No, no, no! Shit, this is hopeless. How am I supposed to save him?

“Requesting permission to sit.” I glanced up to see Ray beaming at me. Strangely though, I didn’t feel my usual feelings of resentment well up. In fact Ray’s attempt to mimic a pilot communicating with air traffic control didn’t exasperate me like it should.

What is wrong with me?

I made eye-contact with Ray again, something I definitely don’t do all that often, and nodded. His grin got wider, if that was possible and he sat down. Before he could speak I leapt in. “What do you do if you’re trying to save someone but no matter what you do and no matter how hard you try you cannot save them?”

Ray pursed his lips and looked like he was deep in thought. I watched him anxiously. When he didn’t reply I felt that familiar annoyance creep back. Jesus Christ! I knew this would happen. 100 dollars says Ray thinks this is a brainteaser. In his stupid little brain he’s probably trying to determine if it was a trick question or not. Better yet he was probably counting how many ‘h’s’ or ‘f’s’ there were in the sentence. I was about to dismiss the question from the conversation when he sat forward.

“Don’t worry about it, Ray. It was a stupid –.”

“Maybe the reason you can’t save him is because he’s not supposed to be saved,” Ray said, speaking softly and weighing his words carefully.

I frowned. That didn’t fit. Of course I was supposed to save him. Jeez, Ray. I shook my head.

“No!” Ray’s voice grew in confidence. “Think about it! You said that no matter how hard you try and no matter what you do you can never save him, right? Well it sounds like he’s not meant to saved.”

For the first time ever I found myself biting my tongue as Ray spoke. I actually wanted to hear what he had to say. Far out, there is definitely something wrong with me.

“You think?” I asked, no longer as doubtful.

“Well you know in Super Mario brothers four when you get to level 10, the fire palace? And you *think* you have to save Peach, the princess, but no matter how hard you try you can never get to her?”

My heart sank.

“And you waste hours trying to defeat Bowser and the guards but whenever you get close a booby trap appears and you die? You keep trying but then you realise it’s not her you have to save but *Yoshi!* He’s the green dinosaur,” Ray provided helpfully. I just nodded blankly wondering if this was going anywhere. “Once you save Yoshi he runs ahead and disables the booby traps and rescues Peach for you!”

Ray finished and looked at me expectantly. I was still blank. Who the fuck was this Yoshi? A green dinosaur? Huh?!?

“I don’t geddit,” I muttered.

Ray tutted loudly. “What I’m saying is like a metaphor to your situation.”

Oh, wow! Why did you just say so? It all makes so much sense now. Thanks, Ray.

“Ok, now, let’s pretend you’re Mario,” Ray said.
I nodded.

“Oh! Unless you want to be Luigi??” Ray asked suddenly.

I gave a short laugh. Luigi? Like the chef off the Simpsons? Ha-ha! Oh, shit. Ray's not laughing. That wasn't a joke. Shit, um, Gerard you idiot! Quick, pick someone! Choose! Mario or Luigi?

"Mario!" I said hastily.

"Ok, Mario it is. Peach is the boy you're trying to save. No matter what you do you can't save him, or rather her." Ray laughed at his own lame joke. "Now is the important part – Yoshi. Is there anyone else in the situation who could possibly double as Yoshi?"

FRANK! Fuck, even when Ray sounds his craziest he makes the most sense. Maybe I was supposed to concentrate on saving Frank because Frank was the person who was supposed to save this Michael kid.... No, what the fuck. That doesn't fit. This whole thing doesn't make any sense. The Mario Brothers?? What am I thinking? Ray's idiocy has seeped into me.

I really need to talk to Markman. She'll know the answer. She knows all the answers to my questions. Well, not all of them. Most of them. Some of them.
Ray seemed satisfied with his metaphor and I didn't have the heart to tell him how absurd it really was.

"Gerard, now let's talk about why I'm really here," Ray said very seriously.
I blinked at him. Oh yeah, he did sit down with the intention of discussing something that was not Mario Brothers.

Ray leant across the table. He indicated for me to do the same. I leant forward, cautious not to let our hair touch. I could not let my hair get contaminated.

"Are you breaking out?" Ray whispered, focusing on me intently.

WHAT? I'm breaking out? Cool.

"You can tell me. Are you planning to escape from here?" Ray's eyes were bright with excitement and anticipation.

I shook my head and saw his face fall like a pebble in water. See, I can use metaphors too! Or, was that a simile?

"Oh? But you are leaving?"

Nope. I shook my head.

“Transferring?”

Hell no! I rule this place. Commence violent shake of head.

“Being discharged?”

Haha, no way José. Sorry Ray. I shook my head.

“Oh dear,” Ray said very dejectedly.

“Why do you ask?” I asked. Maybe someone was talking about me behind my back.

“Well I kinda got this message this morning….” He trailed off.

Oh please. I stood up. I needed to get away from this maniac.

“But my cereal is usually accurate,” Ray mumbled.

I had to jam my fist into my mouth to keep from bursting into a fit of laughter. Well, not literally. I do not possess that talent. Bob does though. He showed me. It’s quite off-putting actually. I scurried off and hid in an alcove. Once I got the laughter out of my system I was on my way again.

Ben stopped me before I got too far. “It’s rec time,” he told me.

Oh, really? I had no clue. I’ve only been here for 30 months! I think I know the damn schedule by now. See he would really be suited as one of those informing people you ring up on the telephone.

“Bathroom,” I muttered.

“Is that way,” Ben informed me and steered me away from where I wanted to go. I walked away until I was out of his eyesight and sat down waiting for him to move. Why did he have to be on duty now anyway?

It didn’t take long for him to leave his post. He got a call from Zach to help calm down some crazy girl. I hurried forward toward the glass door that separated where we were allowed to go and where we weren’t allowed to go. My fingers trembled slightly as I entered the security code. 64593. The little light that was originally red suddenly turned green and I heard a quiet clicking noise. It was unlocked. I pulled it open and slipped inside. As I walked along looking for Markman I found myself grinning. I knew the code for the door was correct. I *know* things, remember? There are no flukes when Gerard is

on the case.

I headed straight for the conference room. I heard voices straight away and knew I was at the right place. There was a pretty heated debate going on in there. I felt a little anxious about walking into a room full of strange people. This was a place I wasn't going to be in control off. I forced my hand to turn the handle and push the door open.

Most of the voices hushed immediately. A group in the middle continued to argue fruitlessly and did not notice my presence. Markman was amongst that group. They slowly realised that something had changed and they all shut up and looked around. Markman turned and her eyes almost bugged out of her head when she saw me.

"Gerard?!" she exclaimed, dropping the folder she had been shoving into another man's face a moment earlier. "What are you doing here?"

"I keep having dreams," I told her, ignoring the staring eyes.

"You can't be here. How on earth did you get past the door?" She rushed over to me, becoming slightly panicky.

I brushed her questions aside. That wasn't important. "I've been having dreams," I repeated.

"Everybody has dreams," she hissed. She grabbed my arm and roughly pulled me away from all her colleagues. "Who did you kill to get in here?" she demanded.

I was shocked. She wasn't serious? She is serious. Jeez, way to crush a man down. "I didn't kill anyone," I said, appalled. "But in these dreams there's this kid but no matter how hard I try I can't save him."

"Jillian, is that a patient?!" The voice was extremely angry. "I'm calling security."

"No!" I exclaimed and tore myself away from Markman's grip. Why wouldn't she listen? "I try and I try to save him but he always drowns. Do you think I'm not supposed to save him or something?"

"How did a patient get in here?"

I kept talking. Screw everyone else. I needed answers. "Then last night I managed to save him but I sorta didn't because apparently he died

anyway. But he didn't die, you know?"

"Is this how you run your facility, Jillian? You let patients run amuck?!"

I continued. "Do you know what I should do? Am I even supposed to save him? According to that lady I did something to him. But I don't think I did."

"Get him out of here!"

"GERARD!" Markman screamed at me. I shut up and looked at her expectantly.

The room erupted. "That's Gerard?"

"He's so much younger than I thought he would be."

"I thought he doesn't speak."

"You're *the* Gerard?"

"They don't look anything alike."

I pleaded silently with Markman but she was beyond my reach now. She was steadily going red and I was certain these witnesses were the only reason I was still alive. I probably just ruined her. Now I bet she'll take away all my benefits. Shit, I like getting my own way.

Two guards arrived at the door. The closest one grabbed at me but I darted away. I leapt up onto the conference table just to get away from them.

"Gerard, please get down," Markman begged.

"Listen to me then!"

"They're just dreams!" she screamed back.

The two guards made the unwise decision to come up onto the table after me. Stationary went everywhere. The ladies screamed and everyone scrambled to get away from the table. The room was in turmoil as I ran around everywhere escaping the guards. They weren't bad, but they definitely shouldn't have followed me up onto this table. I jumped off the end and ran for the door. The second one read my moves and managed to grab my left wrist as I ran past. I reacted instinctively by twisting by upper body and trying to use my weight to

pull my wrist from his grasp. Then I thought it would be a marvellous idea to throw my right wrist through the stained glass window in the door.

The noise was what scared me the most. I didn't realise stained glass windows smashed so loudly. Coloured shards of glass flew everywhere and were soon accompanied by droplets of blood. *My blood!* Lots of it.

The room suddenly froze and went silent. I clutched my wrist. Oh shit it hurts. Pain, lots and lots of fiery pain. Oh my god there is a huge shard of glass sticking out of my knuckles! Oh my god. Markman ran up to me and very sensibly wrapped a tea towel around my hand and wrist. It stuck up in a lot of places where I had pieces of glass embedded in my hand. Her hand was shaking as she wrapped it. It took all my self-control and pride not to scream out every time she nudged a shard of glass.

If there is a God, he would make me faint right now.

"Just dreams, Gerard," she repeated, her voice quavering.

I felt tears of pain well up in my eyes and I fought them back fiercely. I do not cry. Crying is weakness.

"But if they're *just* dreams then *who* is *Michael?* What did I *do* to him?" I said desperately my voice breaking.

Markman dropped my wrist like it had burnt her. Then she stepped away from me like I had just threatened her. She clasped her hand to her mouth and stared at me like she had never done before. The room simply erupted after that. I hazily saw her drop into a chair. Oh jeez, now God catches up with me. I'll forgive him for being a whole minute late because I am a very forgiving guy, you know? Oh dear, I do hope someone catches me. It's really not as clichéd as it seems.

It is not a lie, it's a terminological inexactitude

Well, if there's one thing I'm sure of in life, it's that I really don't like this solitary confinement thing.

I mean, who would? For one, it's very, very, very boring. So boring no words could ever sum it up. Ever.

I can't help but wonder if this is supposed to be a punishment or something. I'm assuming it is because of my little incident in that conference room. That really didn't go the way I wanted it to. For one, I ended up in a completely white room with padded walls. That was definitely not in my original plan, I assure you. And two, I definitely hadn't planned on throwing my hand through a window. In the split second in which I made that decision it seemed like a fabulous idea.

It was not a fabulous idea.

It hurt.

In fact it still hurts. It doesn't help that it was my right hand either. I am only just realising now how much I use my right hand. I am also just realising how it takes only milliseconds from when I make the slightest movement of my right hand for the pain to flare up.

The bandage starts from halfway up my arm, covers my wrist and knuckles but stops just before the end of my fingers. It's quite peculiar to see just the stubs of my fingers poking out from under this thick and heavy bandage. It almost looks like I have a club on the end of my arm. A white club that smells like disinfectant and medicine, but a club all the same. I like to pretend I'm a superhero and my superpower is the ability to shoot big white clubs from the end of my hand.

Yes, it is very easy to get bored in here.

But here's what I don't understand. This is a mental institution, right? As far as I'm aware and concerned, a mental institution is supposed to help and improve the mental health of its patients. Why then do they have solitary confinement? If anything's going to send someone crazy it's a stark, white room with no windows and doors. Oh, and don't forget the complete and utter solitude. I haven't seen anyone in days. Or is it weeks? There is no sense of time at all in here. So yes, I think

the purpose of having a solitary confinement room in a mental institution is definitely NOT proactive at all. If anything, it's designed to make people crazier.

I wonder why they chose white? Whoever's idea it was, it wasn't a very good one. The white is so disconcerting. I mean, the only colour in this place is my black hair. It's funny, this place is so white, a single strand of my hair stands out like a guy in the girl's locker rooms. I think it's the white walls and floor that sends people crazy. Imagine if it was a pale pink or a pale blue. It could be quite relaxing. But no. They had to use white.

I climbed off the bed and onto the floor. I lay down on my back, eagle spread, and stared up at the ceiling. There weren't even any marks or screws up there for me count, either. Now I really think they actually do want to make people crazier by putting them in solitary confinement. I always need something to do. I need to draw. Or at least look at something and think about it. In the days, or weeks, that I've been confined to this *prison* I have thought every single thought that could possibly ever be thought about every single thing in this room.

Yes, I've even thought about sex. I don't think about sex very much. I don't actually know what it's like. I've never had it before. It's not that it doesn't appeal to me. It's just that I have bigger worries on my mind that far surpass the simple human urge to have sex.

I wonder where the door is. There is a slot at the bottom of the wall opposite me where they can pass in food but it's tiny. My club hand would be too fat to fit through. The padding on the wall makes it impossible to distinguish any breaks or gaps in the wall. Maybe next time they feed me I'll ask when I can come out. Or I could just ask the room. I know they can see me. There is a tiny camera hidden in the corner above the toilet. Well, it's supposed to be hidden. But I know it's there. I wonder if they can hear me?

I stood directly in the view of the camera and started talking. I talked about my hand and how much it hurt and how a few painkillers wouldn't go awry. Then I asked what day it was. I told the camera I was completely baffled as to what the time was and how long I had been in here. Then I requested to come out. I even promised I would never go where I shouldn't go again. I crossed my heart in front of the camera to prove it.

No reply.

Stupid pricks.

From then on I decided the only way to get some attention was to do something drastic. I had given up talking to the camera at least 10 meals ago, which I assumed was 5 days. Now, I decided, I was going to starve myself. The tray was slid in through the slot at the bottom of the wall and I took it. But then I took the cup of water off and set it over in one corner. The plate of food went into the other corner. The flimsy plastic utensils that snapped when you looked at them went in the middle. Then I waited for the next meal. When it came I sorted everything into its respective corner and then used the two trays to have some fun. I stood up and set one foot on each tray and then tried to 'ski' across the room. It didn't work very well because the room was only a few paces long, but there was potential.

It wasn't long before I had enough trays to start building a castle.

But I didn't get to play architect for too long. I was starting to feel really light headed and my stomach ached. I climbed ungracefully into bed and passed out straight away.

When I awoke my room was bare. Damn them! They took my fun and my building blocks. Well, I guess you're not supposed to have fun in solitary confinement.

The next time a meal slid in there was a nice little note to accompany it. It read: 'Eat or we will force a tube down your throat to eat for you.'

That note simply screamed MARKMAN! She was such a sarcastic bitch sometimes. Plus she the only one who would know how to make me believe her threats.

She must still be pretty angry with me.

I don't understand why though. It must be a girl thing.

I found out where the door was, too. Unfortunately, I didn't find it myself. I was lying on the floor, minding my own business when a whole section of the wall suddenly disappeared. The way the external light flooded in and silhouetted the people was a scene for the movies. I'm telling you, it was perfect. All they needed was the smoke and it

would be Oscar worthy. Man, I wish my eyes had cameras. They obviously didn't appreciate the artistic beauty they had just created. They just told me to get up and come with them. I went peacefully. I was just happy to see another human. I was so sure they had forgotten about me.

Based on the way they were gripping my arm I assumed they assumed I would try to run away as soon as I got clear of that blasted room. Well, to be honest, I was thinking of it. But it wasn't worth the effort. And besides, I was pretty sure I was on my way to see Markman. I had been waiting to confront that evil woman for ages now. I'd had a lot of time (and I mean a lot) to think about the whole conference room incidence. I also had a lot of time to reflect back over my water polo dreams.

In other words, it meant I'd had a lot of time to think about Michael.

It's funny; I actually care about this kid as if I know him or something.

My thoughts were interrupted as we arrived at Markman's office. I had never approached her office from this direction before and was surprised. One of my escorts knocked courtly on the door. I rolled my eyes. Jeez, I would've just barged my way in by now. Once Markman invited us in I suddenly realised I was nervous. Maybe I was a little worried about this. You know, just a little bit.

"We have a *lot* to discuss."

I made the mistake of looking in the direction of the voice.

Oh jeez.

That look!

This was every 'Gerard Glare' ever thrown at me rolled into one and multiplied by about seven hundred. Wait, make that seven hundred *million.*

She pointed to the chair on the other side of her desk. As I slowly made my way over she dismissed my escorts. I suddenly didn't want them to leave. I needed witnesses to my death!

"How did you get the code to the door, Gerard?" Markman's tone indicated that she was dead serious.

I shrugged and she stood up angrily. "Did you threaten one of my

staff?" she demanded.

"No."

I think my voice calmed her down a bit. It is rather tranquil. I could be a singer if I wanted to.

"Did you blackmail one of my staff into telling you the code? Or ask them to 'forget' to properly close the door?"

"No," I replied in complete honesty.

Markman's original fury had simmered down quite a lot now. "Did you get the code from another patient?"

"No."

"Did one of my staff threaten you or blackmail you? If something is going on Gerard, I need to know. That's the only way I'll be able to help you."

"No, nothing like that."

"Then how did you get inside the door, Gerard?" Markman said, exasperated and completely baffled.

I understand that she's confused. My brain is a pretty amazing thing. Why else would *they* be after the secrets in it? I don't expect Markman to understand.

"I went up to the door and I entered the code. 64593. That's the code. That's what it's always been. I don't know how I know. I just knew the code. I entered it and the light went green and it let me in. I just knew it was 64593. It's always been that." I thought that was a pretty fair explanation.

Markman sat down heavily in her expensive leather desk chair. "I don't understand you. I just don't understand you," she said simply, looking at me in pure amazement. "Why you had to come to me, I don't know. What did I do to deserve this?"

"You cheated in your senior physics exam," I offered.

Markman looked up sharply. "What?" she said suspiciously.

I really hate repeating myself. I sighed. "You asked what you did to deserve this and I said that it was probably because you cheated in

your senior physics exam."

The silence was chilling. You could hear not just a pin drop, but probably even a hair.

"Oh and I suppose you just 'know this' then?" said Markman in a strangled voice.

Well...yeah! No, I took a wild guess. Of course I know it. I know things. I'm right though, aren't I?

"I know things," I provided astutely.

"Oh! You know, Gerard, I'm starting to think that it's not you that needs protecting from the world. I'm starting to think it's the world that needs protecting from you."

I frowned. I didn't understand. "What do you mean?"

She shook her head, dismissing the statement. That made me angry. She can't say something like that and then not elaborate on it. I looked fiercely at her, infuriated. I'm so sick of not being told anything. I'm not a kid anymore. It's always 'you don't want to know' or 'you don't *need* to know'. Yes, I fucking want to know! Otherwise I wouldn't have asked the fucking question in the first place. You think I don't want to read my files? Of course I want to read my fucking files, they're my fucking files!

"You never tell me anything!" I snapped.

"Yes I do," she replied, defiant.

My heart leapt. This could be my chance. I sat forward eagerly. "Who's Michael then?" I said impatiently.

My hopes faded within two milliseconds of asking the question. Why I bother to get them up anymore I don't know. But when she gave me her answer I lost it. I couldn't handle hearing that again. Not after two fucking years of hearing the same thing.

"I can't tell you."

Yes, that was it. The same fucking four words I have been hearing my whole life. She said the words to me again; just after she defended herself against my accusations that she never tells me anything.

In anger, I slammed my good hand down onto her desk. Markman

jumped and eyed me cautiously. “Why can’t you tell me?!” I shouted.

“Because I can’t,” she replied.

“I’m not making him up! He’s real!” I insisted. I had been worried that maybe, just maybe, he was just a boy in my head.

“I believe you, Gerard. He is real.” She made it sound as though it was intensely painful for her to admit that. “But I can’t tell you who he is.” Now she was ending the conversation with that air of finality she possesses.

However, her reluctance to tell me anything made me realise that something big is going on with this kid. And I knew I was smack bang in the middle of it. I just needed to know *what* it was that I was in the middle of.

“But *why* can’t you tell me?”

Markman shut her eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. I hadn’t noticed before, but she looked positively exhausted. She had dark rings under her eyes and her face was very pale and taut. I wonder if this had anything to do with me.

“I can’t tell you, Gerard, not because I don’t want to but because I’m not allowed to. I think you and several other people could benefit from this information but I am not at liberty to reveal anything to you.”

Ohhh, she’s not at liberty to reveal anything! Oh well that makes it alright then, doesn’t it? I bet some big bad man came down from Mario Land and told her she wasn’t allowed to tell poor Gerard anything.

“Since we’re on the topic, how’s your hand?” Markman asked weakly.

What the fuck? We are not *‘on the topic’*. Being ‘on the topic’ is like talking about school resuming after the summer break and then asking what college Jonny got in. We were talking about something completely different.

But, about my hand…it hurts! It’s really, really hurts. A little morphine would be appreciated. But I didn’t say any of that. Instead I sat back and folded my arms defiantly across my chest. If she’s not going to talk to me for weeks or months whilst I was in solitary confinement, maybe I’ll stop talking to her again. It’s not particularly hard. I did it

for two years, no probs.

“Don’t start this again,” Markman warned.

Oh yeah? Try me.

She knows me way too well. Good thing I know her just as well. I narrowed my eyes and stared at her defiantly.

“How much pain are you in?”

Great, start with open-ended questions. That’ll get me talking for sure. I ignored her. She ignored me and left me to rot, or at least go crazy, in a tiny white room for weeks; I think I deserve a little payback.

I studied my fingernails. They were quite damaged. I had gnawed at them quite a lot recently. I think I had chewed all my fingernails away within the first few *hours* of solitary confinement. I really hate being bored. It was going to take a while for them to grow back properly. I could vaguely hear Markman talking in the background, but *I couldn’t hear her!* Just like they couldn’t hear me.

One thing she said did seep through to me and it filled me with dread.

“I’ve started you on Clozapine.”

It wasn’t a question or a threat. It was a mere statement. But oh shit. Shit shit shit. Fuck fuck fuck. There is no way I am going for a blood test every week. I lunged forward and grabbed the nearest pen and paper. In huge, angry capital letters I wrote: ‘I DID NOT CONSENT!!’

I even added in two exclamation points. I know from past experience two exclamation points or underlines are often effective. On Ray anyway. Once I finished I realised it wasn’t going to be as effective as I hoped it would be. For one, I think it was near impossible to make out my writing. I never was very good as writing with my left hand. I would kill to be ambidextrous right now.

She shrugged and I just realised how fucking infuriating it is when someone shrugs at you.

“I didn’t need your consent, Gerard. I’m your doctor; I’m allowed to prescribe whatever medications I believe will benefit you most. In my medical opinion, Clozapine is the best drug for you at the moment.” She was taking pleasure in my dread and fear. She really is a corrupt bitch. But she is good as reading messy writing. I’ll grant her that.

I wrote: ‘I won’t take it.” Well, rather I wrote something that resembled those words.

She smiled. “You’re already on it. I believe you’re due for your next blood test on... Wednesday. Today’s Monday,” she provided helpfully.

Ahhhhhhhhhhh, shit! Now I’m going to dread the coming Wednesday. I’ll never be able to live a day normally again. They will be constantly plagued with the fears of needles piercing my arms and taking *my blood*. I felt my blood pressure begin to rise.

I was panicking. I was scared. I haven’t been this scared since the roof collapsed and I thought *they* had found me. I can’t stand needles. Needles really, really stress me out. I didn’t realise it, but I had broken out in a cold sweat. I clenched the arms of the leather chair tightly, fully aware that my arms were shaking.

The metal tips. I could see them now. The hollow metal tip poised over the vein in my arm, waiting to be plunged in and dug about.

I hunched forward, my sweat-soaked back peeling away from the leather with a wet ‘slurp’ sound. Markman came over to me. She seemed pretty concerned. She’d better be concerned! She’s the one sending me into this panic attack.

I hunched over even further and threw up violently all over the carpet. Markman didn’t react very much. In fact she actually turned away and started mucking around with her blackberry.

I launched myself out of the chair, the vile taste of vomit and bile still in my mouth. I didn’t know what to do. It was like the whole ‘hand through window’ situation again. I didn’t think. And because I didn’t think I grabbed the nearest object I could find. It was an antique vase and it would smash into a hundred millions pieces. In one movement I could shatter $150,000 on the ground.

Markman stood perfectly still. I don’t think she wanted me to smash her $150,000 vase on the ground either.

“Before you destroy my things let me tell you one thing,” Markman said softly and evenly. “After what happened in the conference room in front of the Health Minister I feel I should warn you. You are *this close*,” she held up her fingers for me to see. Her thumb and index finger were formed to make an ‘O’. It was typical of what a parent would do to warn a misbehaving child. I squinted at her fingers and realised sickeningly that her two fingers were pressed tightly together.

I had no more chances. I wasn't close, I was there. "You are *this close* to Greenwood, Gerard. Please don't take this as a threat, Gerard. This is the best warning I can give you. Be good."

My stomach dropped and so did the vase. But instead of breaking it landed harmlessly on the carpet with a dull thump. My escorts had returned and took me, gently this time, by the arm and slowly began to lead me out. I twisted around to look at Markman. I didn't understand. She couldn't be serious. I couldn't be close to going to Greenwood. Greenwood wasn't the kind of place a guy like me goes. I looked back at her desperately, silently pleading. I just needed her to say it wasn't true. I couldn't leave here. I couldn't go to Greenwood.

I hadn't done anything wrong.

But everyone knew Greenwood was place for the insane. But not just the insane.

The *criminally* insane.

I haven't done anything wrong.

***

I thought they were taking me back to solitary confinement but instead I was admitted into the infirmary. I had been here a few times, but I had never spent the night before. It was so peaceful. It was empty, for starters. I got to choose my own bed as well. It was nice to get that little bit of control back.

The nurse was a young man who looked to be fresh out of university. He was too cheerful but at least it meant he wasn't a hardened old devil who followed the rules to the letter. He offered to bring me some food but I declined. I was still very nauseous and I made the mistake of looking around when I walked in. Who the hell puts syringes in glass cupboards for everyone to see?

I curled up into a ball under the heavy blankets, feeling sleepy but also wide awake. I hugged my V-Bag to my chest hoping I wouldn't need it. I like that they classed it up a bit by calling it the V-Bag. Sounds much better than vomit bag, that's for sure.

Then I made the mistake of thinking. I had avoided thinking about this one thing for so long. In fact, before, I actually lied when I said I thought every thought that could possibly be thought in solitary. I

physically prevented myself from thinking about *him*.

When you're stressed or sick you find you can go days without thinking of things. It's another one of the human brain's mysterious things. It's a tad like how memories work. It's why when people get stressed they forget simple things like basic hygiene or how to laugh. It's the same if you're ill. You forget your sister's birthday or that the dog was due to be vaccinated. However, when you're extremely bored things are a little different. I think I need to come up with a completely different concept on what happens when a person is extremely bored.

For a long time in solitary all I thought about was when I was going to get out of there. I thought about other things but they were all benign. It took all my brain power to keep Frank from being even a benign thought because it was more than possible for benign thoughts to take over and become the dominant thought. All it took was a little emotion.

Trust me; I have plenty of emotions that centre on Frank. I knew that once he was in my thoughts, he was impossible to remove.

Not long later, even though I had fought so hard not to, I fell asleep thinking about Frank.

***

I awoke the next morning after the first peaceful night of sleep I'd had in a long time. Well, it wasn't exactly peaceful but it was deep. Even though my subconscious was flooded with thoughts of Frank, white walls, Michael and Greenwood I didn't dream, which was brilliant. In other words, I slept like a log. Not that logs sleep or anything.

When I opened my eyes I saw the sun. I saw the early morning rays flooding in through the reinforced glass windows. I never thought I'd be happy to see the sun but I was. I really didn't realise how much being in solitary affected me. Usually I don't let these things affect me but this really did. I also never realised how much I needed the routine and regularity of my normal day.

I am never going to go through that door ever again.

The nurse came in and changed the dressing on my hand. No longer did I have my club hand. Now it was just a mummy hand. Once he was done he took me back to my regular room where I could get

changed. He told me to make my way to breakfast when I was ready.

Oh jeez. Breakfast. Food. People. Routine.

I couldn't get changed fast enough. I changed out of my solitary clothes. All they consisted of were long sleeved shirts and long pants. Oh and they were painfully white, did I mention that? In fact I think it's fair enough to say they were unnaturally white. I suspect they overdid it on the bleach. I tossed them on the floor. I decided the cleaners could pick them up. I know that's selfish but I am a selfish person.

I noticed Frank's bed had been moved. I didn't know whether to be upset or to get offended. I crouched down in the corner where his bed normally was and ran my finger across the floor. The dust I collected on my finger was at least a few weeks deep. He had been gone for a long time. They had either fixed his normal room, or he'd been transferred.

I prayed it wasn't the latter. I don't think I could handle that right now.

I needed to talk to him. I wanted to talk to him.

I think I missed him.

Which is weird because I've never missed anyone before.

I wandered into the cafeteria, hungry and forlorn. It was still pretty early so the room was fairly deserted. Ben and Zach were here and two other people I knew only by face.

Ben and Zach both looked at me when I entered. Zach nodded at me and Ben smiled. I nodded back but didn't smile.

I don't smile.

I smirk and sneer and sometimes grin. But I never smile.

We looked at each other for a moment then I broke eye contact. I walked slowly past them toward the counter. I grabbed a box of cereal and poured the contents into a bowl. I didn't spill a flake. I am extremely precise when it comes to my cereal pouring. I poured the milk over the cereal and grabbed a spoon. Cornflakes took exactly

three and a half minutes before they started getting soggy from the milk. But that's pretty good for cereal.

On my way back past Ben and Zach's table I stopped. There was someone sitting at my table. At *my* table.

How dare they.

I stalked over to the table and sat down, glaring furiously at this boy. I guessed he was 18 years old. Who does he think he is? Hasn't someone told him that this was my table? *MY TABLE!*

I folded my arms, affixing him with a defiant angry stare. He seemed completely unperturbed and actually smiled at me.

I cringed. His teeth told me everything I needed to know. He had the teeth of a heavy smoker and a very heavy user. I glanced at his fingers. Nicotine stains littered them and his fingernails were practically dead.

He saw me looking at his fingers and graciously held them out for me so I could see them better. I raised an eyebrow in repulsive disbelief. He smiled again and held out a hand.

"I'm Bert," he introduced.

"Why are you in here, Bert?" I replied listlessly not taking his hand.

A cheeky grin spread across his face and he leant in close. He beckoned for me to lean in. His eyes were so wide and bright I could have sworn he was high right now. Once we were conspiratorially close he laughed in my face. I flinched and was about to pull back when he spoke in a very strange voice.

"He's a little bit like Godzilla. I call him Godzilla. But he's scarier." Bert was whispering urgently to me and twisting his hands together painfully.

I sat back. Looks like poor little Bert took some bad mushrooms. I know the first rule with taking mushrooms is to always have someone to with you when you come down. I'm guessing Bert overdosed on the Magic Mushrooms and had a spectacular hallucination about Godzilla like monsters coming to get him. When he came down, no one was there to tell him it wasn't real so his brain still believes Godzilla is after him. It is extremely easy to manipulate the brain and trick it. I know.

“Hey, Bert, let’s make a deal,” I said encouragingly. He smiled again and nodded. I indicated to the table. “This is my table. Yes, *my* table. If you ever sit here again I’ll tell Godzilla where you are. Okay? That’s our deal. Keep away from the table and I won’t say a thing to Godzilla. Okay? Good.”

Bert’s smile faded and he looked positively terrified. He swallowed with a loud ‘gulp’ before nodding feverishly. He stood up and darted off, shooting me a scared look as he went.

Haha. Gosh I’m an ass. Haha, it was funny though.

“You’re an asshole.”

Normally when someone says that to me I don’t care. I laugh and agree. But when it was coming from Frank, it really hurt. I looked up at him standing on the opposite side of the table. His face was black. He slammed his tray down angrily on the table.

“Why did you say that to him? Did you think it was funny to terrify him? Are you on a power trip?” Frank glared accusingly at me.

For some reason I didn’t dare say I did it because he was sitting at my table. My heart ached. I didn’t want Frank to be angry with me.

“How dare you? Are you really this shallow? You are looking for a power trip, aren’t you? Is that the only reason you’re friends with me?” Frank was shaking but I couldn’t determine if it was from anger or fear or if he was about to burst into tears.

No, no, no. None of this was going right at all. Yes, I was on a little power trip. But it had nothing to do with Frank. This is a bad dream. Frank couldn’t be angry with me. Oh please don’t be angry with me.

Frank sat down and slid his tray out of the way. He leant forward across the table. I could see him clenching his teeth together. “You’re just friends with me because you know I would be easy, don’t you? You know I’m a weak little baby. I’m perfect for you and your big ego. You know I don’t fight. You know I gave up too soon. You know I’m so weak and pathetic that I didn’t even fight to the end. You know I gave up. That’s convenient for you, isn’t it? It’s so much easier when they don’t struggle. But that’s me. I barely even struggled at all. I just let them do what they want. You know it’ll be the same for you, don’t you? You know I’ll let you do what you want. I’m just a pitiful, useless little boy who didn’t fight and gave up way to easily.”

I felt like I was about to explode. I was. My body was going to explode. I would become pink mist and the little bits left of me would go flying all over the cafeteria. Little bits of Gerard would plaster the ceiling and cover the tables. But I knew one part wouldn't be destroyed. The one part that triggered the explosion would survive. It will explode out with everything else. But it will stay intact. My heart will land in front of Frank. Frank stole my heart a long time ago when he first entered the TV room. I guess, when I explode, it's only fair I give it to him.

Frank got up and went to sit next to Bert. I could see him comforting Bert, like they were really close friends. I hugged myself tightly. I so badly wanted to explode. How could Frank think of me like that? I would never, ever touch him or do anything like that to him. How could he possibly compare me to the two men who put him in here?

I picked up my spoon. My cornflakes were waterlogged. There were definitely no survivors. I guess three and a half minutes had passed.

I wish I could die like my cornflakes.

I wish I had a three and half minutes spoil time.

***

I moped around for the rest of the morning. Frank disappeared straight after breakfast and by the afternoon outside time he still hadn't reappeared. I hoped he was okay.

Ben only had to ask me once to come outside today. I only went outside because I wondered if I could somehow contract poison oak and die from it. The sky was dark and threatening rain. It suited my morbid mood.

I wandered outside; Frank's words constantly running back over themselves in my head. Surely he didn't think of me like that? I thought about apologising to Bert but talked myself out of it. It wasn't about Bert. Yes, it was mean to say that to him but what's done is done. The poor kid is on a constant trip, there's not much I can say to comfort him.

Why does no one ever tell me everything? I knew there was something more to what Frank said. I knew what he said couldn't have been

triggered by me being mean to Bert. I'm mean to everyone. I've been mean to Ray around Frank and he's never batted an eyelid. Something had upset Frank. I didn't want him to be upset. I wanted him to happy.

I am ashamed to say I have never been outside before. I don't know why. That's what's so sad. I don't know. I know so many things, but I couldn't tell myself this one simple thing. It was like a large courtyard. To one side was half a basketball court paved with rubber. The lines had long since faded from use. I didn't know how to play basketball. Again, another thing I don't know. I walked off the paved area and onto the grass. The rest of the courtyard was covered in soft, green grass. I guessed it hadn't snowed in a while because the grass was quite lush and overgrown in some areas.

I sat down in a particularly overgrown patch of grass against the fence. It was less of a fence and more of a wall. They disguised a wall as a fence. They are pretty damn good at disguising this prison. Just because there are no bars on the windows doesn't mean I'm not onto them. I ran my fingers along the wall, carefully feeling the surface. It was smooth and even my extra sensitive fingers couldn't find many blemishes in the surface.

My attention was suddenly grabbed by an argument taking place just by the door. Magda, the slightly overweight nurse was attempting to deny Bob his bandaids. From what I could gather, she refused to give him the second packet.

I knew she couldn't stand up against Bob for long. He's so fucking charismatic and persuasive. He could sell condoms to the Pope. Hell, he could even persuade the Pope to turn gay.

Sure enough, a moment later Bob was walking breezily toward the recently severed tree stump in the corner of the yard, behind the basketball court. I got up and followed him. He approached the stump and knelt down next to it. He started talking but because he was facing away from me I couldn't hear his words. I moved closer.

"Hello, Gerard," he said kindly.

"Hello, Bob," I replied awkwardly.

"They cut this tree down because of you," he said opening the first packet of bandaids. When I didn't reply he turned around and sat back on his heels. He knew I had no idea what he was talking about. "When you disappeared Ray told everyone you escaped."

My jaw dropped in disbelief.

Bob nodded sadly and continued, “Ray said you climbed this tree and escaped over the wall. The next day they chopped it down. They didn’t want to give anyone else any ideas.”

“I didn’t escape,” I objected.

“Of course you didn’t. This is Ray were talking about, remember? But either way, Percy’s life is slowly ebbing away. I’m just trying to make it little easier for him.”

Bob turned away and ran his fingers over the wood. I couldn’t help myself. “Who’s Percy?”

Bob patted the tree stump. “This is Percy. Or what’s left of him.”

I could’ve walked away then, shaking my head and wondering why I was stuck in this place with these people. But I stopped when I remembered Frank’s black look. Maybe it was time I stopped being such an ass to people.

I knelt down next to Bob and gently laid my hand on Percy. “I’m sorry.” I didn’t know whether to direct my apology at Bob or Percy so I settled for saying it to both.

Bob nodded approvingly and handed me a box of bandaids. I grinned when I saw the little cartoon images of Mr Bean on the plasters. I glanced at Bob’s box. He had cats.

Bob took a good look around checking if the coast was clear. “I bought extra supplies today,” he whispered and pulled tube of antiseptic cream from his jacket pocket. He smiled at me and popped the lid. He squeezed a little bit onto his finger and applied it to the severed surface of the tree. I ripped a plaster open and carefully placed it over the area where Bob had rubbed the cream. Bob nodded approvingly and moved on to the next spot.

“He was so sad.”

My head snapped up and I stared at Bob in astonishment. “Frank?”

“They wouldn’t tell him where you were. All he had was Ray and his predictions. Before Ray decided you had escaped he told Frank you had been transferred. When you didn’t come back by the end of the week, that’s what everyone believed. He was so angry at you for

abandoning him. You were gone for a long time, Gerard. He got angry at you this morning because when he is really, really sad, he gets angry."

My heart gave a qualm. "But I was back, shouldn't he be happy?"

Bob pursed his lips. "I barely know Frank. Maybe you should ask him?"

"He hates me now."

Bob raised his eyebrows and then rolled his eyes. "He's been looking over here at you for the past ten minutes. I don't think he hates you."

I looked around earnestly and saw Frank sitting on the edge of the paved area fiddling with a blade of grass. I saw his head start to move, as if he was about to glance up and I hastily averted my eyes. I started to sweat but didn't know if it was from nervousness or anticipation.

Bob's gentle voice pierced through my daze. "Get you fucking foot off the flower, she's driving me insane."

I took a fleeting look down at my feet and was surprised to see a yellow flower squashed under my left shoe. I guiltily removed my foot.

"Just stick a plaster around her middle. Shut her up."

I stared at Bob in shock. He handed me one of his cat bandaids. I had used all my Mr Bean plasters on Percy. In a daze I wrapped the plaster around the flower's middle. Bob smiled at me again. "Yes, Gerard, I hear voices, but I'm not crazy. I hear the voices of nature. I hear the flowers, the grass, the leaves, the trees...everything. It's a gift. I love my gift. However, flowers are annoying. They think because they're the prettiest aspect of nature they're the best. They're all girls," he added exasperated.

I stood up unsure of whether to go over to Frank or to let him come to me. If I went to Frank he could get angry at me again. That really wouldn't be good. No, no, not good at all. I started to walk back to my spot in the overgrown grass by the fence.

"Gerard?" Bob called.

"Yeah?"

“Tread lighter on the grass.”

A huge grin spread across my face. I decided it was much nicer to NOT be an asshole to everyone. You learn something new every day. Who would’ve thought that nature had a voice? As I thought about it I tried to set my feet down with a little less force.

“Gerard?” Frank addressed me urgently.

I was determined to get in first. I spun around all thoughts of grass welfare gone from my head. “Frank,” I said firmly. “I want you to know I would never, ever touch you or do anything like that to you. I –.”

“*I know*,” Frank whispered wretchedly. “I didn’t mean it. I thought you were gone. It was all building up inside and I was angry. I didn’t mean it,” he repeated his lip quavering.

“I believe you.” Even though I had been angsting over it all day I knew it would all be resolved.

I hoped it would all be resolved.

“I know you would never do anything like that. You’re good. You’re so good to me. Good man. Good person.”

Frank was speaking fast and feverishly and breathing heavily. I led him over to the privacy of the fence. It was deserted on this side of the courtyard. Everyone was playing basketball, it looked like. Something was wrong with Frank. I had sensed it this morning. Something was eating him up inside.

“Frank, what’s wrong?”

Once I spoke those words Frank looked so relieved my heart pained for him.

“Promise me.”

“Promise you what?”

“Promise me you will never tell anyone? You can’t tell *anyone*. No one. You can’t write it down anywhere. You can’t speak it. You can’t tell another living soul. Including Markman. You can’t tell her. You have to promise me you will die before you tell her this. Promise me, Gerard? Promise. Please promise me.”

My stomach leapt up into my throat.

“Is it something really bad? Frank? Why can’t you tell this to Markman? Is it about her?”

“Promise me, Gerard!” Frank cried. “You can’t tell Markman! If you tell her, she will tell my parents. And if my father ever finds this out it will just confirm everything he’s ever said about me. Okay? If he finds out, it’ll be my fault. *Please* promise me you won’t tell anyone.”

Frank couldn’t have sounded more hopeless or desperate. I nodded. “I promise.”

Frank nodded and paused to inhale deeply. He rubbed his eyes furiously. “It’s bad, Gerard. I don’t know what to do. It’s a sin. But I know you won’t judge me. You won’t judge me?”

“I won’t judge you,” I confirmed sitting forward on my knees and locking eyes with Frank. He was kneeling opposite me, our knees centimetres apart.

He nodded and kept swallowing. He reached up to tug on his hair. “It’s bad,” he wailed.

“Tell me,” I urged. I wanted nothing more than to envelop him in my arms and hug him tightly. I just wanted to hold him so close and tell him he was safe. I just wanted to protect him.

“I don’t know what to do. I can’t think. It doesn’t make it alright, does it?” he pleaded.

“Tell me!” I was practically begging now. I just wanted to put Frank out of his misery.

“It’s bad,” he said again nodding wildly.

“Nothing’s so bad that you can’t talk about it.”

“I – I – I – I – I –I....” he stuttered. “I – I think....” He paused to gaze in my eyes. “I don’t know what to do, Gerard. But, I think, I think....”

The silence was so painful and distressing. I really think I am going to explode. Any second now. Pink mist coming up.

“I think I’m gay,” he blurted out. He downcast his eyes, ashamed.

I started and let the news sink in. I thought back to what he had said

at the beginning.

And if my father ever finds this out it will just confirm everything he's ever said about me. Okay? If he finds out, it'll be my fault.

Oh my god. Frank believed that being gay meant rape suddenly became alright. If his father found out he was gay he would blame Frank and claim Frank was asking for it. Nobody thinks men can be raped. If I ever meet either of those men I will fucking kill them. I swear.

I was still staring deeply at Frank and he suddenly jerked his head back up. His eyes were swimming with tears. It was my turn to take deep breaths. I slowly reached out and gently set my fingertips down on Frank's knees. He didn't react at all.

I took a moment to think before I spoke. "I guess," I said slowly speaking to Frank's knees. "I guess we get to go to Hell together then." I let my eyes roam upwards again.

Frank's mouth fell open slightly but he quickly shut it. He shut his eyes for a second to compose himself and I took the opportunity to keep talking.

"But, Frank, it's not a sin. It's not *bad*. And it *never* makes it alright."

Frank's eyes snapped open and for a moment I was stunned. The look in his eyes was complete and utter relief. It was as though he had finally had a chance to give himself the reprieve he so desperately needed. We stared at each other for a very long minute and I felt his gaze slice through me. It pierced straight through the wall I had spent so many years building around myself. He stared straight into my very soul.

Now normally I'm not the kind of person to believe that 'your eyes are the window to your soul', or any other bullshit like that. But right now, it didn't seem like bullshit. In fact whoever discovered that was a fucking genius. He must've been pretty fucked up too. But that's okay. Sometimes it's okay to be fucked up.

A moment later, as if on cue, the skies opened and the rain started to fall. I guess even the clouds have tears they can't hold back.

Have you ever been so afraid you wished you were dead?

I couldn't breathe. I was vaguely aware of the rapid rise and fall of my chest, but I simply couldn't feel the oxygen flooding my lungs. The fingers on my left hand were curled tightly around the metal frame of the bed; so tight my fingertips were threatening to dent the cold, hard surface. I clutched desperately at my chest with my right hand as though it would help me to inhale.

The portly, female nurse took another hesitant step backwards, glancing anxiously between myself and Ben. The technicoloured tourniquet hung loosely in her hand. Over my loud gasping I heard her say, "Should I administer a sedative?"

A sedative? No fucking way!

She turned and rummaged around in a draw and extracted a syringe. I was watching her thoroughly horrified as she pulled the plastic cap off the needle end. She then dared to take a step in my direction which consequently increased the severity of my anxiety attack ten-fold.

"Don't touch me!" I managed to spit out. My sweaty left hand couldn't keep a grip on the metal any longer so I let go of the bed and found myself waggling my finger at the nurse, trying in vain to stop her from coming any closer. I don't know why I thought that waggling my finger would make a difference, but I wasn't exactly thinking very rationally at that precise moment. I could feel my heart thumping loudly and painfully in my chest and was surprised it hadn't exploded yet. The nausea kept washing over me in erratic waves and I was physically trembling.

"Stop!" I gasped and sucked in a mouthful of air. I clenched my eyes shut as the room spun around me, despite the fact I was lying horizontal and not moving. "Oh, God."

Gerard. Get. Yourself. Under. Control.

I seriously felt like I was about to die, or at least pass out. A second before I was about to resign myself to my black fate I felt something woolly and warm enclose itself around my left hand. The first thought that sprung into my brain was that a teddy bear had wrapped itself around my hand.

Yes, obviously I was not thinking very rationally at that exact moment.

Startled, I forced my eyes open and was ashamed to admit for a split-second I was still expecting to see a teddy bear. However, what I actually saw was so much better.

Frank was standing by my side holding my hand with both of his. He smiled reassuringly at me. “Calm down, Gerard. Don’t think about it. Just think about breathing. In, and out. Good! ” He was breathing steadily for me and I found myself mimicking him.

In and out. In and out.

I felt my heart rate start to steadily make its way down and return to a normal resting rate. Once the oxygen was flowing freely to my brain again I noticed that Frank was wearing gloves. That’s why I felt something warm and woolly around my hand. He was wearing the dark blue pair Ray had given him yesterday. Ray had randomly approached us and announced that God had told him to give them to Frank because apparently Frank would be needing them in the near future.

Frank had accepted them very graciously and thanked Ray sincerely. I just shook my head and rolled my eyes, as I always did when Ray relayed one of his ‘messages’. Because, come on, it’s bullshit.

Once I had completely calmed down the nurse stood by my side. “Shall we try again?” she asked, pushing the sleeve of my hoodie up.

“No!” I exclaimed wrenching my arm from her grasp and cradling it to my chest.

Oh had I mentioned I hadn’t actually *had* the fucking blood test yet?

“Gerard,” Ben scolded and I glowered at him.

“Gerard,” Frank said softly. His voice drew my attention immediately and I looked up at him. “It doesn’t hurt, you know,” he said earnestly.

“I-I-Yes! I know!” I said defensively. “It’s just I don’t like needles.”

Needles are my biggest fear in the whole world. Well, technically, my second biggest fear if you count discovery by *Them* as being my first. So, I can only imagine how I’d react if *They* found me and attacked me with needles. I can’t stand the thought of the metal tip being forced

through my flesh. Just the thought of the slight indentation they make before they pierce the skin makes me nauseous. Then, oh god, the way it's pushed through layer after layer of tissue before it reaches the muscle….

"It's okay, hun, I just need to find a vein first." My daytime nightmare was mercifully interrupted by the nurse gently tugging on my right arm.

I reluctantly relinquished my arm and let her push the sleeve up. I watched her extremely closely, fully prepared to rip my arm away if she produced a needle. She clipped the tourniquet around my bicep, which I regretfully noticed was looking pretty small, and tightened it. She started pressing gently in the crook of my elbow with her fingers. I knew she was wasting her time feeling for a vein in my right arm. There aren't any veins running along that particular spot, I knew. Well, there is one, but it's quite small and deep so there was NO FUCKING WAY I was going to let her go digging around in my flesh trying to get it to bleed. I repeat: NO FUCKING WAY!

Sure enough, a moment later she unclipped the tourniquet and moved around to the other side of the bed to search in my left arm. She shooed Frank out of the way and took my shaking hand from his comforting grasp. It was at that moment, when he let go of my hand, I felt like my lifeline had been cut. I suddenly felt like an astronaut whose cable connecting them to their ship had been severed and they were slowly drifting away, alone and frightened, into the vast emptiness. I was an astronaut and Frank was my cable. I was about to shut my eyes and let myself drift into the emptiness that was my mind when that teddy bear took a hold of my right hand.

"I don't want to be an astronaut," I blurted out and frantically clutched at Frank's hand.

"What?" Frank's brow creased and he leant in slightly as though he had misheard me.

I shook my head, embarrassed, and muttered, "Don't worry, it's stupid."

Frank squeezed my hand comfortingly. "I'm sure it wasn't that stupid," he murmured softly.

I don't know if you've ever noticed but when you go to say a word starting with the prefix 'th', like "that", or "Thursday", your tongue pokes out forward between your teeth a little. I noticed little things

like that. In particular, I noticed how endearing it was to see Frank's little tongue flick whenever he said a word beginning with the prefix 'th'. Okay, yes, it is a little creepy that I have a habit of staring at Frank's tragic lips, but really there is nothing *that* wrong with it.

"Ahhh," the nurse's soft cry diverted my attention from Frank's perfect lips to my arm. "There's a nice, juicy vein in this arm," she informed me.

I wished she wouldn't talk about my veins as though they were worms. I'm already freaked out enough as it is. Now I have a very vivid mental image of giant, plump, blue worms being pierced and punctured with huge metal-tipped spears. I can even see the copious amounts of blood spurt out all over the grass as the spears begin to penetrate the worm's skin. Fuck, that's gross.

The nurse loosened the tourniquet, stepped away from my side and collected several packets from the locked drawer in the cabinet Ben was leaning against. She placed them down on the table next to the bed and began to open them. My heart rate began to steadily climb again as she opened the sterile packaging containing the needle.

"Gerard." I ignored Frank and just stared at the huge needle in her hand.

"Gerard?" I bit my lip as it had begun to tremble slightly as the nurse snapped the glove on.

"Gerard." I winced as the nurse ripped open an alcohol swab and wiped the crook of my elbow. She tossed the used swab in the bin and picked up the needle.

"Can you swab my arm again," I asked quickly and she glanced up at me, surprised.

"Of course," she said slowly and ripped open another sterile packet and disinfected my skin again.

"Can you do it again, please," I pleaded as soon as she had finished the second time.

"Gerard," Ben said exasperatedly. I didn't dare look up at him for fear this crafty nurse might plunge that needle in whilst I was distracted.

"There are germs," I protested stubbornly. "Once more, please?"

Despite my pleading the nurse retightened the tourniquet and picked the dreaded butterfly needle up again. As it moved in slow motion towards my arm I felt something soft touch the side of my face. Frank cupped my face with his free hand and gently turned it to face him.

“Don’t look,” he said gently.

“But…,” I began but Frank simply shook his head and that was enough to shut me up.

A small smile crept across his face as we stared at each other and my heart fluttered a little. I was so intent on gazing at Frank’s face I almost missed the nurse’s quiet warning: “Sharp sting, Gerard.”

I held my breath and squeezed Frank’s hand *hard* as I felt the cold, hollow tip puncture my skin and slip neatly into the vein. Frank shook his head at me as I began to turn my head to look. “Don’t look,” he ordered, glaring at me jokingly. I swallowed and nodded meekly. A second later I heard a quiet click as the nurse pushed the vial into the adapter attached to the butterfly needle. Instantly I felt my blood begin to flow through the plastic tubing into the vial.

I clutched harder and tighter at Frank’s hand as the ominous sound of my blood spurting into the vial reached my ears. I could feel the blood spurting from my vein into the vial in perfect synchronisation with my rapid heart beat. “Oh God,” I moaned, sickened.

I glanced up at Frank and was surprised to see a small grimace on his face. He smiled reassuringly at me and said, “Gerard? Um….you’re having a blood test, Gerard, not a baby.”

“What?” I gasped, confounded.

“Would you mind not squeezing my hand like you’re in labour? Please?” he said apologetically.

The indignant look on my face must’ve been pretty funny because Frank took one look at it before chuckling. He rarely ever laughed so I decided to treasure the look of pure happiness and joy that was visible on his youthful face. His mouth broadened into a grin wide enough for me to see his entire top row of teeth. I loosened my grip significantly and began to slide my hand out of Frank’s grasp until I was merely pinching his palm with my thumb and forefinger.

“Is that better?” I asked sarcastically, but not in a mean sarcastic way, however. I would never, ever, speak in that manner to Frank.

Frank sighed in an exaggerated fashion. “Yes,” he replied.

“Done. Firm pressure here, Gerard.” I didn’t understand for a moment what was going on and it took a second to register that the nurse was speaking to me. Frank slipped his hand out of my grasp as I turned to look at my arm. The needle was gone and instead the nurse was holding a cotton ball over the puncture site. “Firm pressure,” she repeated and grabbed my now free other hand and guided my fingers to the cotton ball. Once the bleeding stopped she put a small, round plaster over the puncture site.

And that was it. It was over.

What a fucking ordeal.

“See, now that wasn’t so bad, was it?” Ben asked slyly, purposely baiting me as we walked away from the infirmary.

I stopped dead in my tracks and glared resentfully at him. “Sometimes, I really hate you,” I said simply and marched off, hoping to God Frank would follow me.

He did, of course. I don’t know why I ever doubted that he would follow me. I would always follow him. I would follow Frank to the end of the world, and now I knew he would do the same for me. It’s a fantastic feeling to have information like that. It warms you deep inside your heart. Every time I go somewhere and Frank elects to come with me, rather than stay watching the movie or doing one of the pathetic art activities, I feel so fucking fantastic I could explode. I’m serious, it’s definitely a feeling everyone should be privileged enough to feel sometime in their life. That’s not to say, however, that I never followed Frank around. If he wanted to go outside or into the rec room, I accompanied him. I would always accompany him. *Always.* It ain’t no fucking lie. I would follow Frank to the end of the world.

We sat down in the cafeteria opposite one another at my table. I was strangely hungry. Now that my blood test ordeal was over I was permitting myself to think of other things. One of those things I was now thinking about was that it has been over 12 hours since I had eaten. That’s quite a long time, you know. Especially because the meals in this place are strictly regulated. Thankfully though, they

were still serving breakfast at the counter on the far wall.

Frank and I stood up again and made our way to the counter. I acknowledged the cafeteria lady and started slathering the cold toast with peanut butter. Frank stood beside me and was doing the same, except he was using the jelly. When I was finished I waited for Frank. He wasn't paying as much attention to his spreading liked I had. I liked my toast to be completely covered. I liked to have the peanut butter spread all the way to the edges so that when I took a bite, the portion I bit off would always have a satisfactory amount of spread on it.

It was silent between us as we ate. It wasn't an uncomfortable silence though. It was actually quite relaxing to know that we didn't have to speak; that words weren't necessary.

"Wanna swap?" Frank asked eventually holding out a slice of his toast temptingly.

"'Kay," I replied, accepting his offering and handing over a slice of my own toast.

I screwed up my face in disgust as Frank made a sandwich out my slice of peanut butter covered toast and a slice of his own jelly toast. I was never a big fan of the peanut-butter-and-jelly-sandwich idea. I shook my head slowly. Frank knew exactly what I was disgusted about but he wasn't fazed. He shrugged and bit into his creation nonchalantly.

Over Frank's shoulder I saw Ray making his way over to us and I heaved a sigh of irritation. I wondered what he had to say today. Perhaps the sky was about to fall in? Or maybe the grass was about to die? Who fucking cared?

Frank glanced around and made a 'tsk' noise at me. "Don't be so mean," he said.

I didn't have a chance to defend myself because Ray sat himself down next to Frank and grinned at us both. He ran his hand through his mass of hair excitedly. "I have *big* news," he chattered, barely able to contain himself. "It's huge, guys. Like, so freaking huge it's gonna blow your mind!"

I let my head flop forward, not even bothering to act interested. Frank must've felt bad about my apparent rudeness because he pretended to be interested himself and asked what the *big* news was.

I looked up again. Okay, so maybe I was a little interested, but it didn't mean I had to let Ray know that. I usually get a kick out of Ray's messages; some of them are quite original and amusing. Ray glanced around conspiratorially and tousled his hair agitatedly. "Not here," he whispered. "Outside, where they can't hear us. I'm gonna get up and leave, okay? But don't follow me just yet. Wait five minutes then meet me outside near Percy." A second later he propelled himself out of the seat and attempted to walk casually toward the door. I chuckled; Ray was attracting more attention to himself by purposely trying not to.

"Who's Percy?" Frank asked, mystified.

I realised that Frank must not have heard Bob's story about the tree stump near the back wall. "Percy is, ah… um… the tree stump," I said uneasily.

"The tree stump?" he repeated disbelievingly.

"Just…go with it, yeah?"

Frank nodded. He was like me; he didn't question the insanity of the other people in this hellhole. He just accepted it. That's all you can do really.

"Has it been five minutes yet?" Frank asked a minute later through a mouthful of toast.

"Nope, it's been two and a half," I answered indifferently.

"How'd you know that?" he demanded, looking around for a clock.

"I just know."

This was another one of those moments where Frank knew not to question me. He could've asked how I knew, but he knew better than to question the origin of my knowledge. Hell, even I didn't know the origin of my knowledge. I just knew, it was as simple as that.

As we made our way outside Frank was trying to guess what Ray was going to tell us. "You put way too much thought into this," I told him.

Frank shrugged. "It's fun," he said. "I like Ray. Don't you like Ray?"

"Yeah, I like Ray," I said hastily. Okay, so that was a lie. It wasn't a full-blown lie; it was more of a little lie, a half-lie. I didn't exactly hate

Ray or dislike him in any way; I just didn't like him all that much. He was everything I wasn't: CRAZY.

You see, I'm not crazy like most of the people in this place. I still don't even know why the hell I'm in here. Apparently I am here for a reason but fucked if I know what that reason is. Though, actually, lately I think I'm starting to figure out what that reason is. I think it's got something to do with Frank. I think I was put in this place to save Frank. Just like I saved him in those water polo games in my dreams, I think I am supposed to save him in real life.

But I don't quite know how I am supposed to that yet, either. But I'm sure I'll figure it out. I always do.

Frank nudged me with his elbow as we stepped outside. "What is he doing?" he asked me.

"Maybe he's dead," I answered bitterly but slightly hopeful.

"Gerard," Frank chided, horrified at my lack of compassion.

Yes I'm a terrible person, okay?! But, I *really* hated going outside. I feel like I'm wearing a big, red target on my back whenever I stepped outside. Now I don't mind going outside if Frank wanted to, because like I said, I would follow Frank to the end of the world. Ray, however, was a *very* different story and he was pushing his luck by demanding we meet him outside.

We made our way over to the back wall and to where Ray was lying eagle-spread on the grass staring up at the sky. When he saw us coming he shielded his eyes from the sun and half-sat up to greet us.

"Act natural," he told us in a low voice. I thought we *were* acting *very* natural and that it was Ray who was acting suspicious. "Lie down," he said patting the grass on either side of him.

"No," I said without a second thought. I wasn't lying down on the grass. I looked to Frank for support and, surprisingly enough, got it.

"I don't wanna lie down, Ray. Sorry, it's just all the dirt and…," Frank trailed off. I watched him rub his hands together nervously before shoving them deep into the pockets of his black hoodie.

Ray looked annoyed at the rejection. He sat up properly and crossed his arms, frustrated. "Will you sit down at least then? You're drawing attention to us!"

I looked to Frank. I would do whatever Frank wanted to do. Frank screwed up his face a little and I could almost hear the internal battle raging in his head. It made me so sad to see him torn like this. Eventually he sat down opposite Ray, keeping his precious, clean hands tucked safely away in his pockets. I sat down as well, but kept my hands free to pick at the grass.

“Look at the sky,” Ray said earnestly as soon as we were seated.

I craned my head back to look at the sky but saw nothing of consequence. There were quite a few white, fluffy clouds forming bizarre patterns but I could see nothing unusual. I looked back to Ray and raised an eyebrow.

“The clouds!” he exclaimed.

I gazed back up at the clouds, my interest fading rapidly. “What about the clouds,” Frank inquired politely.

Ray made a disapproving noise in the back of this throat and I resisted the urge to stand and leave. “Can’t you see the message?”

No, Ray, obviously we do not see the fucking message, you freaking idiot!

Ray raised his arm and pointed toward a bunch of clouds. “There! Can’t you see the words?”

All I could see was…wait for it… a bunch of clouds!

Frank leant over to me. “Can you see it?” he whispered so Ray couldn’t hear.

“No,” I replied shortly, squinting desperately at the clouds, hoping the words would miraculously form if I stared hard and long enough.

“Okay, good,” I heard Frank murmur.

“You can’t see it?” Ray said again, finally. Frank and I both shook our heads, causing Ray to sigh dejectedly. “Well it’s there,” he insisted. “You’re just not looking hard enough.”

“There’s only so hard you can look at freaking clouds before you determine they’re just clouds,” I snapped.

I expected Ray to be upset with me but he didn’t react very much at all. He sighed again. “Oh well. I guess you just weren’t given the gift.

Do you want to know what it said?"

"No!"

"Yes."

I groaned and pouted at Frank. He didn't need to keep encouraging Ray like this. It was cruel to indulge in his fantasies. Ray positively *beamed* at Frank and proceeded to ignored me completely. He leant in closer to Frank and, in a dark undertone, said, "They are coming."

My stomach dropped. It dropped so far I was sure it had left my body and disappeared into the earth below my feet. It was probably halfway to China right now. "What did you say?" I choked out.

Ray and Frank both turned to look at me, confusion shrouding their faces at my sudden change of character.

"They are coming," Ray repeated. My mouth went dry and I tried to swallow but with no avail. "Hey man, are you okay?"

They are coming.

They are coming.

They are coming!

I desperately hoped that this was just one of Ray's hallucinations. It had to be. He always got these kinds of messages. None of them had ever been correct before. So, he couldn't be accurately predicting the future now. Could he? Maybe I'm overreacting. Yes, okay, I'm overreacting. Yes, it's not logical. Ray can't predict the future. No one can predict the future. Only superheroes can predict the future. And superheroes only exist in my comic books. It's not true. It's just not true.

Why wasn't I convincing myself?

I stood up and glanced around anxiously, half expecting to see *Them* marching toward me with their guns and their masks. But there was no one.

Yet.

Ray and Frank both stood up. Frank walked toward me but Ray toddled away, a blank look on his face. Did he not know the calibre of this situation!?

“Gerard, what’s the matter?” Frank asked cautiously, standing directly in my line of sight.

I backed up toward the fence, my eyes scanning the courtyard with a sense of urgency I hadn’t felt in a very long time. Once my back touched the cold surface I slid down it into a crouch. “Nothing’s the matter,” I said anxiously.

Frank didn’t press the issue and I thanked him in my head. He crouched down next to me and we surveyed the yard together. I don’t think Frank knew what we were looking for, but I didn’t want to tell him. I didn’t want to frighten him.

“How’s your arm?” Frank asked after a long period of silence. It must’ve been a good seven minutes since we’d exchanged any words.

I stopped fretting for a second and focused on my arm. I flexed it gingerly, remembering the nurse’s advice to take it easy for the day. It didn’t hurt. I pushed the sleeve of my hoodie up to reveal the area and peeled the tiny bandage off. All I could see was a tiny, red pinprick of a hole. It was quite pathetic really, considering the suffering and mental trauma I’d endured. Frank peered over at my war wound and nodded approvingly.

“You didn’t bruise,” he informed me. “Lucky.”

Bruise!? There was potential for me to bruise? Why didn’t anyone tell me that? Bastard nurse.

“When they did mine the nurse missed the vein so she had to try again. Then, the second time, the vein collapsed and it caused this huge bruise all under my skin. It was pretty gross.”

Why the hell did Frank think I wanted to know that?!? Hang on, why was Frank having a blood test?

“Why did you have a blood test?” I asked, gently prodding my arm, not looking at Frank.

It took a while for Frank to answer and when he did I realised by the tone of his voice he was embarrassed. “They had to test for AIDS…and STDs, you know?”

“Oh. *OH*!” I blurted out a moment later, the realisation hitting me like a tonne of bricks. How could I have been so stupid and shallow? Gerard, you freaking heartless bastard! “Oh, Frank, I’m sorry. I didn’t

mean to….” I was lost for words. I had no idea what to say to that. What could you say to something like that?

“It’s okay,” he said hastily, shrugging my insensitivity off.

But it wasn’t okay. He obviously wasn’t okay. “Frank?” I said sincerely.

“Gerard!” he snapped. “It’s fine, okay? I’m fine, please leave it.”

“Okay.”

“Thank you.”

This time the silence between us was awkward. I hated awkward silences. I racked my brains desperately trying to think of something to talk about, but Frank got in first.

“Is Markman serious about you having this blood test every week?”

Oh you fucking bet she is! The satanic bitch is purposely taking pleasure in inflicting this torture upon me. It’s all part of her diabolical plan to make my life miserable. Of course, I didn’t tell Frank all of this. I think he liked her. So all I said in answer to Frank’s question was: “I think so.”

“That’s pretty mean, doesn’t she know you don’t like needles?”

“Oh, she knows.”

Frank smiled a little at my sarcasm. “Is there any way you can only have the test once a month, or something? Maybe?”

I had thought of that, but it didn’t sound like a good idea. It took less than a week for that agranulocytosis thingy to develop. If I consented to a test only once a month, then knowing my luck, I would develop the condition and die. Goodbye Gerard.

“I don’t want to get that white blood cell condition. I don’t want to die,” I said.

“I don’t want you to die either,” Frank said quietly.

Well, at least there’s one person in this miserable place who likes me. That’s heartening. I glanced up and surveyed the yard again. My eyes widened as I spotted someone standing on the paved area who definitely hadn’t been there before.

“Jasper!” I exclaimed, dropping the blade of grass I had been shredding.

“What?!” Frank yelped, startled by sudden outburst.

I grinned and stood up. “Jasper,” I repeated.

Jasper didn’t smile back at me. He never smiled really. He was a very proper man, you know, being in the army and all. I waved to Jasper and he acknowledged me back with a salute. He was dressed in his official military uniform. The fringes of his green shirt were adorned with gold trimming and he had a gold sash draped over his chest. He had all of his medals pinned proudly to his chest as well and I could see his silver belt buckle gleaming at me. He beckoned to me urgently but I didn’t make my way toward him.

I was with Frank. It would be rude to abandon Frank. I am trying to be a better person. I shook my head and tilted my head toward Frank.

“Gerard? Who are you talking to?” Frank said, standing by my arm.

“Oh, it’s just Jasper,” I replied dismissively. Jasper wasn’t important, he could wait.

“Who?”

“Jasper, he’s over there.” I pointed at Jasper then looked across at Frank. Frank swallowed as he stared toward Jasper but his face remained blank. I didn’t understand how Frank could miss him. He was conspicuous enough in his military dress. “He’s wearing a military uniform. The type of uniform the men wear in the parades.”

Frank swayed a little on the spot as his head swivelled from me to Jasper and back to me.

“What’s the matter?” I asked, concerned.

“It’s just…I don’t — I can’t — he’s not…I don’t see him, Gerard,” Frank stuttered, uncomfortable.

I frowned. Maybe Frank needed to get his eyes checked or something because he was definitely there. “He’s there!” I exclaimed and pointed.

Frank squinted to where I was pointing but no recognition crossed his face. “Gerard,” he said carefully, “there’s no one there.”

I scoffed. Of course there was someone there. “Oh, he’s going inside,”

I said, “hang on, I’ll be right back. I’ll just go see what he wants.”

“Gerard,” Frank said weakly, looking scared for some unknown reason.

“Hang on,” I said and jogged toward the door.

I followed Jasper inside and into the supply closet that was situated in the middle of the corridor that connected the east and west wings.

“Lock the door,” he commanded as soon as we were inside.

I was a little disconcerted by Jasper’s manner but I followed his directions. I was about to ask him what the hell was going when he started yelling at me.

“What in God’s name do you think you are doing?!” he shouted, causing me to flinch. “How did you get so careless, Gerard? WHY did you get so careless? I bust my arse everyday out there trying to save you, Gerard! Imagine my surprise and dismay when I turn up and see you chatting away with that punk kid like you have no care in the world!”

“His name is Frank,” I muttered defiantly.

Jasper grabbed me harshly by the shoulder and forced me up against the wall. He was so close I could see the veins littering his older, maturing face. He was bigger than me and much, much stronger. He had never gotten violent with me like this before and it made me realise that something had happened, or was about to happen very soon.

“Did I ask you to tell me his name?” Jasper seethed in my face.

I swallowed, nervously noting his bloodshot eyes. “He’s my friend,” I said.

“NO! Gerard, we’ve been through this before. You can’t have friends! Don’t you realise how fatal it is for you to have friends?”

“I don’t care.”

Jasper let go of my shoulder and stepped back to survey me. He took his cap off and tucked it under his arm. He didn’t say anything; he just shook his head at me like I had done something terrible.

“You’re falling in love with someone who can’t love you back,” he said

eventually. He wasn't yelling anymore. He had gone back to his usual, composed self.

"I'm not in love with him."

Jasper threw his cap at me in obvious annoyance. I caught it in surprise and held it apprehensively in my hands. I wasn't quite sure if he wanted it back or not.

"Why did you have to fall in love with the one person you knew you couldn't have?" Jasper asked.

"I am not in love with him," I insisted and threw the cap back at Jasper. He didn't move his hands to catch it so it bounced lightly off his chest and landed upside-down on the dusty floorboards.

Jasper took a step toward me. I took a hesitant step backwards. "He's a rape victim, Gerard. You know that, you read his file." He took another step toward me. I took another one away. "He can't bear to be touched. He suffered extensive psychological damage at the hands of those two men. Nothing you do will be able to repair that. I know you think you can fix him, but you can't."

"I can try."

Jasper stepped forward again, but I was pressed up against the wall and had no where to go. "What about you, Gerard? Who's going to comfort you? Stop thinking with your cock and start thinking with your brain. You weren't given this knowledge for it to go to waste, you know?"

I went bright red as Jasper spoke. "I'm not thinking about having sex with Frank," I said, mortified. It was true. It had never once crossed my mind.

"But you will. One day. And hell, maybe Frank might even be up to trying it one day! But who's going to be there to comfort you, Gerard, when Frank bursts into tears halfway through? Who's going to pick up the pieces of *your* heart when you realise that the love of your life looks at you and sees only those two men? Who's going to wipe your tears when you realise that you and Frank can never be intimate together. You'll never be able to be close. You'll never be able to meld into one person, Gerard!"

I didn't care. Everything Jasper was saying was just making me realise how much I was falling in love with Frank.

“You’re not listening to me, are you?” Jasper said finally. He must’ve noticed the dazed look on my face.

“No.”

“Don’t be smart with me, boy,” he scolded.

“I was telling the truth.”

“You were being smart about it.”

“Shut up.”

Jasper’s eyes nearly popped out of his head, but I didn’t care. I wanted to get out of this tiny, stuffy supply closet and find Frank.

“I don’t want to bring this up, Gerard,” Jasper said. “But don’t you remember the last time?”

I shook my head slowly. What last time?

“Gerard, you know what I mean.”

But, I didn’t. I couldn’t think of what he meant. Last time what?

“You can’t let people get in close, Gerard. It’s what *They* want. It gives them an advantage. Don’t you think they’d go after the one person you’re emotionally attached to? What are you going to do then?”

“I’ll protect Frank,” I said automatically.

Jasper was looking uneasy now. “That’s what you said last time,” he whispered.

“What happened last time? I don’t remember. Tell me. Tell me!” I demanded.

Our conversation was interrupted by an obnoxious banging at the door. I spun around fearfully. “Open this door now, Gerard!” I heard Zach yell.

“Jasper,” I cried. “Tell me what happened last time.”

“You tried to protect him, but you failed. You can’t win against *Them*. Frank is just going to get hurt like the other boy. Cut him loose. It’s for his own good. You know what happened last time.” Jasper had picked up his hat and was casually spinning it on his right hand.

“No, I *don’t* remember! What other boy?”

“You know his name. You tried to save him. Don’t you remember, Gerard? You tried to save him, but you failed. Don’t fail this time.”

I was going out of my mind. I didn’t know what he was talking about. I didn’t remember. I knew that I knew, I just simply couldn’t remember. I brought my clasped hands up to my face and pressed my lips to my thumbs to try to keep them from shaking.

“Think! Gerard! Stop panicking and use you brain. The information is in there, you just need to find it. You….” Jasper shut up abruptly and stopped spinning the cap in his hands. He slowly raised his head to look at the ceiling and I found myself mimicking him.

I suddenly realised that Zach was no longer banging on the door. In fact, I only remember him banging just the once. What happened to him? Oh, good lord.

Jasper was scared. I could see it on his face. I was terrified now. It was a struggle to continue to draw in each breath and my hands were trembling. Something bad was going on outside, I could sense it. Jasper slowly put the cap back on his head and turned to me. “You need to get out of here,” he whispered. “Now!”

The sound of gunshots reached my ears and my whole body seized. *They* weren’t coming anymore. *They* were here.

“RUN, GERARD!” Jasper screamed and propelled me toward the door.

My fingers were numb and they fumbled uselessly on the lock. Every precious second that flittered by as my fingers struggled to undo the lock saw an increase in my fear and desperation. It seemed almost an eternity before I heard the click and was able to push down on the handle. The corridor outside was deserted. The lights that hung overhead flickered ominously. I felt like I was in a bad horror movie. I felt like I was the lead character being stalked by the monster that could see me but I couldn’t see them. I was shaking so bad now that when I exhaled my breath came out in shuddery gasps. I knew I couldn’t stay where I was so, despite being stricken with terror, I took a tiny step in the direction of the west wing. When nothing leapt out at me I began to run. I didn’t know where I was running. I just knew I had to get out.

I rounded the corner at a tremendous pace, my shoes skidding dangerously on the polished linoleum. I don’t think I have ever run

this fast before in my life. I glanced up for a moment to reorient myself when I saw *Them.* They were standing at the end of the corridor, at the entrance to the showers, looking at me. Waiting for me. My eyes widened and the nausea swept over me violently like a rogue wave. I think I stopped breathing. My brain wasn't getting any oxygen and neither were my muscles. I needed to run, but I couldn't.

There were five of *Them*. They were all lined up in row, shoulder to shoulder. They were dressed in pure black clothing from head to toe. Their faces were hidden behind black masks. On their chests I could see the bulky outline of a bullet-proof vest and in their left hand they all clutched a gun. It wasn't your standard type of gun though; these guns weren't loaded with bullets. No, no, no. Their intention was to take me alive.

I would never let them take me alive.

That one thought ran over and over through my brain and like an electric shock it provoked me into moving. I turned my back on *Them* and ran harder and faster than before away from them. I would never let them get me. The secrets belonged in my brain. They would never get them.

I took a hard right into the cafeteria. It was deserted also. Where was everyone? Why wasn't anyone coming to help me? Had they been killed? Was Frank dead because of me? I refused to think any more of the possibility. I was making my way through the middle of the room when something hit me hard in the shoulder. I tripped and fell face-first into one of the metal tables. I groaned and rolled over onto my back, my head throbbing painfully from where it had connected violently with the furniture. I could feel myself lingering on the edge of unconsciousness and fought desperately to stay awake. I needed to keep running. I needed to get away.

A masked figure loomed in my face and I screamed. Instinctively I threw my clenched fist at his face and connected with the moulded plastic that was hiding his features. He grunted and sat back, allowing me to roll over and struggle to my feet. Just as I found my footing two more faceless people grabbed my arms and pinned me against the wall.

I was frightened. I was terrified. I was so afraid that I *wanted* to die.

The only thought I was managing to process was: I want to die.

This debilitating fear was the kind that no one should ever be forced

to endure.

They were surrounding me now. There were also a lot more than five right now. I couldn't count them, my brain simply wouldn't, but I could recognise that there were too many of them for me to escape. It was over. The world was going to end.

One of *Them* stepped forward from the faceless group and stood in front of me.

"Found you," he taunted.

As I stood there wishing I could at least close my eyes I saw his gloved hand drift slowly towards his pocket. He pulled out a scalpel and waved it tormentingly in front of my face. He held the scalpel in his right hand and began to move it toward my head. His left hand pushed my hair off my forehead.

"Let's see what we can find in here, yes?" he said throatily and pressed the horrifically sharp blade to my skin.

I didn't feel any pain as he sliced into my skin. The adrenaline pumping through my body was enough to dull everything.

But, this was it. He was going to get the secrets in my brain. It was all over.

I was surprised when he stopped suddenly and dropped the scalpel. The two other people holding me by the arms suddenly relinquished their grips as well leaving me to slump to the ground. *They* all suddenly took a step backwards. I didn't understand what was going on. Had they gotten what they wanted? Was I dead?

"Gerard. It's okay. You're frightened. It's okay to be frightened. Tell me why you're afraid?"

"Make them *go away*," I sobbed. "I just want them to go away."

"I'm trying," Markman said calmly. "I'm going to administer a sedative, Gerard. Do you understand me?"

I looked past Markman at *Them*. They were still standing in the room. There were hundreds of them. They were standing motionless in their perfect rows staring at me from behind their featureless masks. Watching me.

Markman injected the sedative into my leg and I could feel it slowly begin to take effect. In fact, I could almost hear it singing as it flooded through my veins. I felt my eyes drift shut and allowed the drugs to sing me to sleep.

We Scream To Avoid Suffering In Silence

I was having a hard time trying to determine whether I was dead or not. I didn't think I was dead…but I have been known to be wrong. Even though me being wrong *is* a rare occurrence, it is still possible. My head ached and felt like it had been stuffed with cotton wool. If I was alive, then it was probably the drugs making me feel like this. But if I was dead, it was most certainly the fact that *they* had stolen all my secrets and packed the empty space with nonsense. When I say nonsense I am referring to pointless things like how differentiate a polynomial and the order of U.S. Presidents. You know, useless shit like that.

It hurt tremendously to open my eyes, but I was determined to find out where I was so I forced them to obey my will. The light in the room, although dull, instantly forced my eyes shut again. Slowly, I was regaining feeling in my limbs again but was horrified to discover no matter how hard I tried to move them, they wouldn't. Surely I wasn't paralysed? No, I couldn't be. I could feel the light touch of the sheet on my skin. What was going on? Why can't I move? And what the fuck is that beeping sound?

Blinking rapidly I reopened my eyes, wincing at the light. As my eyes adjusted slowly I realised I was in a hospital bed. Why the hell was I in the hospital? What happened? Fuck me. My eyes darted anxiously around the room, taking in all points of possible exit. The beeping sound grew steadily in tempo as I did so.

I was most obviously alive, but why? Hadn't *they* gotten what they wanted? I started running through the secrets in my brain looking for the ones they had stolen. I had reached the letter 'H' in my inventory when the door opened and Markman stepped in quietly. I wasn't panicking yet; everything seemed to be in order, so far.

"Are you in pain?" Markman asked gently.

I didn't answer her; I was just making my way through 'K' and all the vital secrets were fast approaching. I didn't need any distractions right now.

"Is the bandage too tight?"

I faltered in my inventory as she questioned me. My breath caught in my throat as I realised the pressure on my head was caused by a tight bandage. I didn't need to complete my inventory anymore; Markman had just confirmed my fears herself.

It had been real. *They* did cut into my head. *They* had taken my secrets.

"What are you thinking?" she pressed. I frowned and a burning pain shot through my forehead. She was trying to trick me into talking. I knew she was. But I had learnt my lesson, I knew better this time. *They were* capable of tracking my voice.

I tried again to move my arms but discovered I was being restrained by padded straps. Furiously I tugged and fought against the straps but with no avail. This was my worst nightmare, I was completely defenceless. Didn't she realise? The fact I was still alive meant *they* hadn't succeeded in their plan to steal my secrets and kill me. And because the world wasn't in peril and ending, it was obvious *they* had taken the *wrong* secrets. It meant *they* would be back, soon, while I was still weak. I jerked violently against the bonds. It wasn't too late. The world wasn't over, yet, there was still a chance. I could defeat *them*.

Markman realised what I was trying to do. "I can't remove your restraints, Gerard. Please calm down."

Calm down!?! What was she thinking? That's what *they* want!

"She's working for them, Gerard. You know she is. It explains everything, doesn't it?" Jasper appeared out of nowhere and perched himself on the edge of my bed. I gaped at him. She was working for *them*? Surely not?

My mouth remained open in shock as my head swivelled to stare in disbelief at Jasper and to eye Markman cautiously. Jasper raised one grey-flecked eyebrow at me. "Don't be stupid," he said patronisingly as I dared to doubt his accusation. As much as I hated Markman, she was one of the only people I felt I could trust. She had never done anything to make me think she was in league with *them*.

I snarled at Jasper and he recoiled. Angrily, he leapt to his feet and glared at me. He was wearing his military uniform again but it was slightly more ruffled than it had been during our last meeting. What had he been up to?

“Gerard?” Markman called for my attention and I flicked my gaze to her apprehensively, anticipating a counter-reaction from Jasper in response to my disrespect any moment. “Who are you talking to?”

“Lie,” Jasper hissed. “Don’t you dare tell her, Gerard. Don’t you dare,” he threatened through a clenched jaw.

I swallowed, frightened and shook my head at Markman.

Markman’s eyes flicked up to Jasper, then back to my face. “Is someone else in the room?” she asked carefully.

Yes, of course there was! Can’t you see him? The bastard is fucking threatening me.

“You think I’m a bastard, Gerard?” Jasper questioned smugly.

Wait, he could read my mind? Holy fucking shit!

“Who is it, Gerard?” Markman said urgently. “Who is it?”

I bit my quivering lip as my eyes darted back and forth between Jasper and Markman who were standing on opposite sides of my hard and lumpy hospital bed.

With my eyes I begged Jasper to go away. His presence was sending chills down my spine.

“I’m trying to save you!” he roared. “I’m here to save you, Gerard, not harm you. What is your problem? Do you want them to get you and slice your head open again? I’m here to protect you!”

Bullshit. The word ran savagely through my head and Jasper glared at me furiously.

“Gerard, look at me,” Markman ordered and I obeyed.

Jasper was shaking with rage. “Don’t you tell her, Gerard,” he warned me again.

“Is there someone else in the room, Gerard?” she asked, focusing on me intently.

My eyes flicked back and forth between Markman’s concern and Jasper’s fury. It was almost like I was at a tennis match watching the ball fly back and forth. I weighed up my options. Should I risk discovery again and inform Markman of Jasper’s presence, or should I

trust Jasper, who had never lead me astray in the past, and keep quiet?

“Is there someone else in the room?” she repeated, emphasising her words and never averting her eyes from mine.

I swallowed and with one last glance at Jasper I lifted my chin to look eye to eye with Markman. Then I nodded once. It was only a slight nod, but Markman understood. I wondered if she could read my mind too. I wouldn’t put it past her.

A wave of realisation swept over Markman, but I was baffled as to the nature of her sudden epiphany.

I hesitantly snuck a glance at Jasper but was surprised to see he had disappeared. I sat up, alarmed. Did that mean *they* were coming again? I twisted my torso, straining to examine all the corners of the room in the futile hope Jasper was hiding in one of them. He had vanished as mysteriously as he had appeared. After a full minute passed and I heard no gunshots I convinced myself I was safe for the moment and relaxed.

Markman was leaning over a table and jotting down notes in an official looking folder. A folder I suspected contained my file. The very file that I *apparently* didn’t want to read. What a bitch, I hated when she decided my life for me like this. A few more minutes passed and she showed no signs of stopping her extensive note taking. I was completely thrown now. Markman had never recorded anything I said or did this extensively before. Fear, suspicion and regret thudded uncomfortably in my chest in sync with my heart as I realised that perhaps Jasper was right. Maybe she was in league with *them*. Was she writing everything down to give to *them*? Had she been helping *them* all along? Fuck me.

My aim was to calm myself down. Panicking was not going to get me out of these restraints anytime soon. I needed my hands free. I couldn’t stand being immobile like this. It was making me anxious. And it was no secret that anxiety and I were not the best of friends.

I cleared my throat loudly to acquire Markman’s attention. She looked at me astonished for a moment before raising a single finger to me. That finger was plainly saying: “wait.”

But I didn’t want to wait. I wanted to read my file. Now. Not later, not in a minute. Now.

Markman dragged a chair over to the side of my bed and sat down gracefully. She crossed her legs and propped the folder against her knee. She looked at me expectantly. I looked at her expectantly. We were both very expectant of each other this morning.

“Can you tell me about the other person in the room with us?” she requested.

Nope. I shook my head and pressed my lips together tightly to symbolise the recommencement of my vow of silence. Ooooohhhhh, Markman wasn’t happy with that. I grinned nastily at her, knowing how much I was irritating her. I tugged on the restraint that was securing my right hand to the bed. If she wanted a response out of me I was going to need a free arm to write.

She sighed and rubbed her eyes, clearly exasperated. I felt only slightly guilty at how much pleasure I got out of making her job ten times harder than it should be. Despite her misgivings she undid the restraint and I stretched my right arm gratefully. She passed me a piece of paper, a pencil and a book to lean on. I took them eagerly and wrote: ‘Is that my file?’

As I handed it back to her she shook her head, amused. When she didn’t answer I flipped the book over to see what it was I was leaning on. It was a textbook entitled, ‘The Mental Health Journey: The Doctor-Patient Relationship’ and it was written by J.A. Slater, M.D. I chuckled at the title and propped it up for Markman to see. I raised an eyebrow, questioning the presence of the book in my room in the first place. I guess, after all these years, I’m still intriguing and puzzling her. She was obviously so baffled as to my genius she was resorting to reading old medical school textbooks. The only thing that confused me was the ‘Mental Health’ section of the title. Did she really think I had a mental illness? I wasn’t mentally ill. I wasn’t depressed or suicidal or anything like that.

“When in doubt, go back to the basics,” Markman muttered and blushed.

I nodded and shrugged. It was a good mentality to have, I guess. A spasm of pain stabbed through my forehead again and I realised I had completely forgotten about the bandage around my head. I touched it gingerly.

“Oh,” Markman said, suddenly. She had forgotten about my wound as well, I think. “I suppose you're wondering about your head?”

I wasn't actually. I knew exactly what happened.

"You collided with that table quite severely," she told me. Did I detect a hint of regret in her voice just then? "You split your forehead open quite nicely."

No! I did not split my head open on the table. *They* sliced it open. That's what happened. Don't try to lie to me!

"But don't worry," she assured me, mistaking my confusion as worry. "The very best plastic surgeon on the East Coast was flown here directly to repair your head injury. He promises that that scar will be invisible. He really is the *very* best." She emphasised the 'very' more than was necessary.

Why was the very best plastic surgeon on the East Coast flown to New Jersey to repair my head? Why was I so special??? I shook my head and stared down at the sheets.

"What's the matter?" Markman asked, holding out the piece of paper and the pencil to me.

I took it and thought for a moment. Why would she be lying to me? What did she have to gain from it? Every second that passed made me think more and more of the possibility that she was in league with *them.*

I wrote: 'That's not what happened.' I held it up for Markman to read and I watched her intently for a reaction that would betray her and reveal her allegiance to *them*. I didn't get the reaction I expected, or wanted. She seemed genuinely confused for a moment.

"What do *you* think happened?" Her voice was gentle.

I wrote down what had happened in the last few minutes before she had sedated me. I wrote in detail about *them* and their attempt to steal my secrets. I left out the part about Jasper though. I wasn't too keen on finding out what his reaction would be when he realised I had betrayed him. I added onto the end: 'They must've tracked my voice.'

"Oh, Gerard," she breathed as she read what I had written. "I had no idea," she said stunned. "You must've been so scared."

I nodded hesitantly.

"Gerard, I know I've spoken to you about this before, but do you

remember the conversation we had about the illness called schizophrenia?"

Vaguely, yes, I do remember that word. I also remembered ignoring everything Markman had said because it was absurd. I nodded hesitantly again. Why was she bringing it up? I'm not crazy.

"Do you remember being diagnosed with schizophrenia?"

My heart thudded painfully in my chest and I refused to make eye contact with Markman. I would not sit here and let her try to convince me I was crazy. I wasn't crazy. Ray was crazy. Bob was crazy. I was nothing like them. I wasn't crazy. I turned my head and stared at the wall, determined to block out everything Markman was trying to tell me. She was lying.

Markman sat forward and set my folder down on the ground. "Please look at me," she requested.

I shook my head and kept my eyes on the wall. I was staring at the wall so hard now I was half-expecting it to crumble under the intensity of my gaze. I heard Markman sigh and sit back, at a loss again. I continued to stare at the wall until I heard a knock at the door. The door opened and Markman greeted the newcomer.

"Gerard," she announced loudly. "This is Dr. Reynolds, the plastic surgeon."

"Hi, Gerard!"

His cheerfulness made me sick. I ignored him too. He had styled blonde hair and piercing blue eyes that were all too eager to engage me. I despised his attractiveness; it merely reminded me of my own plain appearance.

"I'm just here to look at your stitches, Gerard. Do you mind?"

He took my lack of a response as a no. His long, million-dollar fingers deftly undid the bandage on my head until the cool air stung the wound. He turned my head to face him as he examined the stitches carefully. "Nice," he muttered to himself. "That's repairing perfectly," he informed me. "I doubt there will even be a scar. You owe me," he added playfully.

I most certainly do not! I don't owe you a thing, you arrogant ass. I didn't ask for your expert fingers to keep my head perfect. I wouldn't

have cared if I had a massive scar across my forehead or not.

“Are you sure?” Markman asked apprehensively. Obviously she didn’t believe in his self-assuredness as much as he did.

“Yep. You taking him home today?”

“Yes, the swelling in his brain has decreased to a stable level for transport. I’ll escort him back to Bluestone tonight and monitor him there. Familiarity is best for Gerard, I think.”

Dr. I-Think-I’m-So-Great-But-I’m-Not-Really wrapped the bandage around my head again as he chatted casually with Markman. It was like I wasn’t even in the room. They had no qualms about discussing my future in front of me, but it irritated me.

“Did *he* approve that?”

“*He* has no say,” Markman replied stiffly, offended by Dr. Reynolds doubt.

Who was *he*? Gosh, the secrets were really coming out now. I pretended I was still ignoring them, but secretly I was listening hard.

Dr. Reynolds laughed good-naturedly. “I meant no offence. Please accept my apology. What did the latest CT results say?”

Markman crossed the short distance to pick up the large envelope slotted behind my chart and extracted the negatives of my CT scan. She handed them over to Dr. Reynolds who held them up against the light box near the bathroom. Markman stood by his side, her head barely reaching his broad shoulders.

“That’s from three years ago,” Markman whispered and pointed to the scans on the left. Her intention was to prevent me from hearing but I heard everything anyway. “These were taken this morning.”

Dr. Reynolds whistled under his breath. “That crack is getting bigger,” he murmured, tracing his fingers over the scan. I squinted but I couldn’t see any trace of a crack in my skull. What was he getting at? Why was he looking at three year old scans? I don’t recall having scans three years ago. I can’t even remember back to three years ago. I couldn’t even remember what I had for dinner last week. I couldn’t even remember what I had for breakfast half the time.

Wait, hang on. Yes, I do. I remember one day. On that day, I had

peanut butter on toast. And Frank had jelly on toast. Oh Frank, how could I have forgotten about him? It was his fault I was here. It was his fault, but I couldn't find it in my heart to blame him. If he hadn't been so upset that day in the group therapy session I would never have spoken to him. If we had never formed that bizarre understanding that day I wouldn't have felt the need to offer him my room. If we hadn't shared a room, I would never have dreamed of speaking to him. If I had never opened my mouth, *they* wouldn't have tracked my voice and tried to steal the secrets in my brain.

I knew what this meant now. It meant I had to stay away from Frank. It was too dangerous for me to be around Frank anymore. It was too tempting to open my mouth around him. Besides, Jasper had been right all along. When *they* come back to finish what they started, Frank couldn't be around me. I was becoming too emotionally attached to Frank. He was just going to get hurt if we stayed friends for any longer. It was a risk I wasn't going to take.

I loved him too much now.

Tears of despair pricked in my eyes but I blinked them back furiously. There was only one thing to do now. I knew Frank wouldn't want to be cut out of my life just like that. It would hurt him too much. He wouldn't be able to cope, I knew he wouldn't. I needed to transfer. I couldn't go back to Bluestone.

On the piece of paper I wrote my request to Markman: 'I can't go back to Bluestone. Please don't take me back. I need to transfer to another facility. I don't care where. It's too dangerous for anyone to be around me anymore. When *they* come back to finish what they started they will go after Frank. *They* know he is the only person I care about. I won't be able to protect him. Just like the other boy. I don't know who he was except that I tried to save him. I failed that time, I won't fail again. Please help me.'

I waited until after Dr. Reynolds had left before I handed over the note. Markman read through it, shaking her head the whole time. She seemed quite torn for a minute and I felt hopeful. However, by now, I should've known better than to pin any hope on that woman.

"Get some sleep," she told me and walked out.

I did manage to go to sleep in the end but had the most terrifying nightmare of my life.

I was walking through a massive mansion and was definitely lost. The

white walls were identical to each other and the rooms were void of any objects. I couldn't distinguish between the rooms and had the despairing feeling that I was travelling in circles through this spacious house. I finally arrived at the bottom of a vast staircase and climbed it in trepidation. I had no idea what awaited me and sweat was dripping down my forehead. In a vague motion I swept my soaking wet hair out of my face and was surprised at how wet it had become. The next thing I knew, my clothes were soaking wet as well and dragging me down. It became a struggle to continue placing one foot in front of the other to climb the stairs. The weight became too much for me and I fell to my knees. However, instead of landing on the hard, marble stairs I fell abruptly into a pool of water.

Frank was clutching at me in an instant. I wrapped my arm around him protectively whilst using the other to keep us afloat.

"Help me," he screamed in my ear.

I made him hold onto the wall while I swam toward the centre of the pool. As I trod the water, it steadily became harder and harder under my feet until it felt like I was stuck in cement. Horrified, I glanced down at my feet and realised I was standing on solid ground again. I was back in the featureless mansion.

"Frank," I cried out, spinning around.

There was blood everywhere. The white walls of the mansion were dripping in the red viscous liquid. It oozed down the walls slowly, leaving a dark trail. My stomach churned uncomfortably as I took in the ghastly sight. I took a step forward and my feet made splashing noises. Bewildered, I let my eyes drop down to the floor. The blood seeping down the walls was forming pools and I was standing directly in the middle of one. My sneakers were stained red and matched the front of my clothes.

How did my clothes get blood on them? There was blood on my hands too and I panicked before trying to rub it off on my jeans. My efforts only caused the blood to smear all over my wrists and forearms.

So much blood.

I spotted Frank a good twenty yards away lying motionless in the puddles of blood. As I ran toward him the ripples I caused battered his lifeless body. I was scanning his face for any sign of life but he was as void of life as this house was of colour. No matter how much I ran, Frank's body never got any closer. I cried out in frustration and slowed to a halt.

The wall to the right of Frank's body suddenly split open and a figure

stepped out. He was wearing a featureless mask and I couldn't identify him. He knelt down and ran one pale finger over Frank's face. He stood and held up his finger for me to see. Then he pressed his blood-stained finger to his face and wiped the blood on the mask exactly where I'd imagined his lips to be.

He leant down again to dip his finger in a puddle of blood near Frank's head. The red liquid dripped slowly down his finger and onto his palm as he inverted his hand. I realised aghast, that he was smiling at me. The blood stain on his mask over his lips curved wickedly into a smirk.

His clean hand removed the mask suddenly and I let out an anguished cry as I recognised the person behind the mask. He leered at me and raised his blood stained finger to his real lips this time and coated them in the blood. My hands clenched together as he then proceeded to lick his lips slowly, mopping up the blood with his tongue.

"You monster," I shouted at him.

The insane look in his eyes increased as he laughed creepily. The sound echoed in my head as I struggled to comprehend. The loathsome man standing over Frank's body licking the blood wasn't a stranger. He was someone I knew all too well. It was me under that mask. I was the monster.

In the car on the way back to Bluestone I trembled constantly. I was tired, scared and cold. I didn't dare close my eyes for fear I would drop off to sleep and see all that blood again. There had been so much blood. Too much. Markman pestered me the whole way back to speak to her but I just stared out the window. When she accepted that I wasn't going to converse with her she pressed a pencil into my hand and urged me to write down what I was feeling. Like hell I'm going to write down what I'm feeling. What is this? The fucking second grade?

I didn't want to go back. I couldn't go back. How was I going to look into Frank's eyes and inform him I couldn't be around him anymore? It wasn't as though I didn't *want* to be around him, it was just that I *couldn't*. I knew he wouldn't understand. Of course he wouldn't understand. I would actually be offended if he understood and just walked away. That would hurt me. But then again, I'm used to pain. I deserved pain. I deserved all the pain the universe could throw at me. I didn't deserve to be happy. I was a monster.

But I wasn't crazy. No, no, no. That was one thing I was sure of. I was not crazy.

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Did you know that it's possible to die from lack of sleep before you die from starvation? I would never have believed it was true until I stopped sleeping. Every time I dared to close my eyes I saw the blood again. I saw it dripping off the walls and pooling onto the floor. I would wake every time trying not to scream. I would stuff my pillow over my face and scream into it until my oxygen ran out and I had to stop. I couldn't bear to keep seeing Frank lying there dead anymore. I forced myself to stay awake. The toll this act was taking on my body was incredible. Like I said, I would never have believed you could die from lack of sleep. But, if I'm lucky, you can.

I know I've said a few times that I wasn't going to kill myself. Just because I wasn't going to kill myself didn't mean that sometimes I didn't want to die. I hadn't seen Frank since I'd gotten back and every second that passed without me seeing his perfect face was a vicious and brutal stab in the heart. I refused to leave the infirmary. I curled up in a ball under the blankets and stared at the wall. One would think that staring at a wall for 23 hours a day, every day, would become taxing but you'd be surprised. I was surprised I hadn't discovered this pastime before. Did you know that there are 1958 marks on the wall next to my bed? I count them every day, just to make sure I hadn't miscounted. Occasionally I would count only 1950 marks, which was incorrect, so I would begin my tally again.

Oh, another thing I'd discovered: I really, sincerely, despised Markman.

"You're not staying here any longer," she told me after I refused to move for another week.

My spirits soared out the window at that moment. Was she really going to transfer me? Oh, I love you, Markman.

"Get up," she demanded.

Oh, fuck you. You're not transferring me, are you?

"Move," she demanded but I resisted. "Okay," she said, her voice rising an octave. She marched over the cupboard angrily and pulled out a tourniquet and a needle. "Let's get this week's blood test over now then, shall we?"

Ohhhhhh no you fucking don't! I stared at her fearfully, thinking she was joking but she wasn't. At that moment I also discovered that lack

of sleep also makes you incredibly weak. Even against Markman I was useless. I couldn't have this blood test now. I needed Frank. Frank was supposed to be my lifeline. I felt another anxiety attack brewing. Please don't! She clipped the tourniquet around my bicep and tightened it unnecessarily tight.

I shook my head at her, my face betraying a mixture of fear, despair and pain. My eyes were filling with tears again as I pleaded with her to stop. I couldn't do this now. I needed Frank. What the fuck was I thinking? Pushing him away was not the answer. He was my lifeline. I am the biggest fucking idiot on the planet. Fuck Jasper and fuck *them*.

"Will you come with me to the group therapy session then?" She paused in her attempt to pierce my skin with the needle.

Uh-huh. I sighed and nodded, irked by the fact she had manipulated me again.

Everyone else was shuffling chairs into an off-centre circle as we arrived together. Straight away I could sense Frank's presence in the room but didn't dare raise my eyes from the ground to find him. I sat as far away from Markman as possible. That demon lady had crossed me one too many times for me to even pretend to like her anymore.

Markman opened the meeting by introducing the new kid to everyone. His name was Adam and he was crazy too. I could sense from the way he spoke. His voice was jittery and his sentences were disjointed. He would start to say one thing then abruptly change his mind and start on a new sentence. It was incredibly off-putting.

"Would you like to begin, Ray?"

Ray just loved being the first to speak at these meetings. I personally think he lived for these meetings. He found it a tremendous honour to share his 'messages' with everyone. If I was getting weird messages like he was I wouldn't be shouting it to the world. That would be the last thing I would do. I would keep it to myself. It would be my secret.

"One of my messages actually came true!" His eyes were overjoyed as he shared his achievement with the group.

"Now, now, Ray, we've spoken about this before." Markman may as well as thrown a dart at his balloon.

The look of pure dejection on his face was incredible. I thought the poor guy was going to burst into tears for a moment. Instead he

scowled and folded his arms defiantly across his chest.

“Gerard believes me,” Ray announced in a very matter-a-fact tone.

I did? Why was he bringing me into this?

“Don’t you remember? The clouds,” he prompted.

Don’t say it. Don’t say it.

“The clouds told me ‘They are coming’ and they did, didn’t they, Gerard? They came.”

Everyone was looking at me curiously. I shrugged, refusing to confirm or deny anything. I didn’t want to think about them. I bit my lip nervously and struggled to think of something else. Thinking of anything was better than thinking of them. In the end I settled on filing all my memories of Frank to ensure they wouldn’t get lost in my head.

Markman prompted Adam to speak next after my silence continued on for an extended period of time. Ray was shattered that I hadn’t backed his claims up but I didn’t really care. Adam told us how he had been abducted by aliens when he was out swimming in the ocean one cloudy night. At that moment it almost killed me to keep the peals of laughter inside. My ribs were aching by the time he finished his recount. I knew I had the biggest smirk on my face but it appeared I was the only one. How could that not be amusing to anyone else? Seriously, how drugged up was everyone?

I hadn’t planned on contributing to this group meeting at all, and I’m positive Markman was aware of that. However, it didn’t mean she wasn’t going to try.

“Gerard,” she began, “I think it’s your turn.”

I raised my eyebrows at her condescendingly. How stupid was she really? With a bored look upon my face I shook my head. Me, speak at a meeting? Ha, you wish jellyfish.

The next person to speak was Frank and I had been looking forward to hearing what he had to say the most. I didn’t care about messages in clouds, or aliens abducting innocent swimmers. I cared about Frank and everything he had to say.

“I forgot my birthday,” he said faintly.

“When was your birthday?” Markman inquired.

“Two weeks ago. Halloween. I only realised this morning that it’s November. I forgot my birthday,” he repeated dolefully.

To me, birthdays are a waste of time and memory. I can’t stand the attention and the colour and the noise associated with them. They’re just painful experiences. Besides, I don’t have any friends. Who would buy me a birthday present or bake me a cake? *No one*. Exactly my point. To Frank however, birthdays obviously meant a lot. And now he had lost one. Fuck, I hope I didn’t have anything to do with that? With my luck, I probably did.

“Why didn’t you tell anyone?”

“The only person I wanted to tell wasn’t here.”

My heart thudded painfully in my chest. Fuck, fuck, fuck. It was my fault. Oh, god, I hated myself. Don’t make eye contact. Don’t make eye contact. Do not raise your head. Keep looking at the ground, Gerard. Be a man. The guilt swirled intensely in my stomach. I could sense all the eyes staring at me again and I wanted to disappear.

“Would you like to have a cake, Frank?” asked Markman.

“No, thank you,” he murmured. The misery that laced his voice right then almost made me cry out.

I’m sorry, Frank. I’m so, so, so, sorry. Please forgive me. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you, Frank. I swear I didn’t mean it. It took all the self-control I could muster to keep my mouth shut. My heart continued to splutter in my chest but I fought against it. The guilt was consuming me faster than I would have ever thought possible.

Frank didn’t say anymore after that. I switched off then. Nothing else interested me enough to keep listening. However, I was so exhausted from lack of sleep that my eyes kept drifting shut. It didn’t take me very long to slip into unconsciousness.

Oh, fuck. So much blood!

I awoke abruptly and slid sideways off my chair. I buried my face in my shaking hands and bit down hard on my palm to quell the screams. Don’t look at Frank, I commanded myself. A split second later I made the very wise decision to walk out. As I walked out, my stomach protested angrily abut the lack of food I had provided it with

over the last week, so I decided to go to dinner before I retreated back to the infirmary.

The blinds over the reinforced glass windows had been secured back and the entire cafeteria was bathed in golden sunlight as the sun set for the day. Bad day to be a vampire. The menu today consisted of soup, soup and more soup. I hated soup. I collected a bowl of chicken soup anyway, my ravenous stomach winning me over. I weaved my way back through the tables to my table. It looked exactly the same as it did when I saw it last.

There was practically no chicken in this chicken soup. It should have been called vegetable soup with added chicken instead, I decided. I made a mental note to mention my renaming of the soup to the cafeteria ladies sometime. I got to three pieces of diced chicken, sixteen pieces of corn and twenty three green peas when Frank sat down hesitantly at my table. I cringed and stood up, avoiding his eyes. If I looked into his striking, alluring, hazel eyes I would crumble and give in.

“You don’t want to talk to me anymore.” It was more a statement than a question. Yes! Of course I want to talk to you. I want to make you laugh and see you smile that beautiful smile. I want to see your face light up and come alive. I want to see the stars sparkle from your eyes. I want you, Frank, but I can’t have you. I couldn’t bring myself to nod; I couldn’t find it in myself to sever our relationship. I sighed sadly and walked away towards the infirmary.

As I approached the infirmary I was turned away and sent to my old room. I sent the stupid male nurse the most loathsome, hate-filled glare I could muster but he must’ve been immune because it didn’t faze him. I stomped away, cursing Markman to hell in my head. I hated her.

After the lights went out it became harder and harder to stay awake. The darkness was definitely in league with my head in its attempt to lure me into a terror-filled slumber. I fell asleep only once where I was resting uncomfortably against the hard metal frame of the bed. An agony-riddled moan escaped my lips as I awoke shuddering uncontrollably. It was looking more and more like I was going to have to request sleeping pills to escape these nightmares. Not that Markman would give them to me anyway. She would blackmail me if she knew what I needed. I wasn’t going to hand such a power over to her without a fight.

I started pacing after that. I'd never heard of a person falling asleep whilst standing before. Sure, cows could but I wasn't a cow. I walked back and forth across the room so many times I lost track. I would touch the wall on one side of the room then stagger my way over to the door and slap my fingers against the wood. Only once did I fall down and it only made me more determined to get back up. Hey, don't they say: fall seven times, stand up eight. It inspired me and kept me going for a few more laps.

The knock on the door was so unexpected I thought I had imagined it. Panic gripped me as the door opened slowly. Of course it wasn't anything bad that stepped through the doorway; it was Frank. Frantic, I ignored him and recommenced my pacing. He stood over to the side and watched me walk, an amused smile playing on his god-like face. My heart raced ahead of my thoughts as I snuck a glance at him.

"Can I ask why you are pacing?" he whispered tentatively.

You can ask, yes. I didn't reply in words or even acknowledge that I heard his question. He sighed and sat down on my bed, tucking his legs up to his chest.

"You don't have to protect me," he murmured. "I know you think you have to, but I'm here to tell you that it's not necessary."

How did he know about that? I faltered in my brisk walking and glanced uneasily at him again.

"As soon as I get out of here I'm signing up for karate," he explained and I couldn't tell if he was serious or joking. "Anyone tries anything on me again, they're dead." I smiled at the earnest undertone to his voice. "I'm not going anywhere. You can't get rid of me that easily, Gerard."

I stopped wearing a path in the floorboards and he said something that sound suspiciously like, "finally." I turned to face him and folded my arms seriously. He could not treat this like a joke. But his face was the epitome of seriousness as I gazed at him. Even in the darkened room I could see everything. My eyes are brilliant like that.

"Aren't you tired? You look exhausted," he informed me.

I wrapped my right hand around my neck and heaved a sigh. I didn't need to nod for Frank to understand. "Dreams again?" he guessed.

I agreed with a nod and he pursed his lips sadly. He ran his hand

through his black hair absent-mindedly. “Do you wanna tell me about them?”

I did. But it wouldn’t have the same effect if I had to write it down. Frank patted the space next to him on the bed and I sat. It was hard not to be attracted to Frank when he smelt so fucking fantastic. I inhaled deeply, feeling only slightly guilty. He grabbed my sketch book from where it had been abandoned on the floor and I accepted it. I left most of the gory details out of my recount of the dream but knew I couldn’t get away without mentioning Frank’s deceased status. As Frank was reading what I wrote he didn’t seem scared like I had anticipated. Even as he read the part about him being dead he stayed very calm and un-reactive.

“Do you think me being dead is a metaphor for the other boy, Michael?” he breathed eventually.

I nodded. That was what I had suspected as well. It’s amazing how alike we were on some things.

“That’s……interesting,” he noted and underlined the section where I had described the blood on my hands. “Don’t be angry with me,” he said timidly, “but have you ever killed anyone?”

I groaned wretchedly. Frank held the sketchbook out to me and I wrote angrily: ‘I don’t remember!’

Frank recoiled away from me noticeably and I felt furious at myself. To amend my deeds I wrote: ‘I’m sorry. What I meant was I don’t know. I don’t think so. I think I would know if I had homicidal tendencies.’

He nodded slowly and smiled reassuringly at me. I groaned again and let my head fall back to rest against the wall. I felt Frank rummage around in his pockets for something and rolled my head to the side to see. He pulled out the pair of dark blue gloves that Ray had given him ages ago. He pulled them on and I got a shock when he clasped my hand tightly.

“I have an idea,” he mumbled. I encouraged him to continue with my eyes. “Well, in your dreams you say you keep finding me dead, right? Well, maybe if I stay here and hold your hand while you sleep, it’ll sink through to your subconscious that I’m not dead and that I’m sitting right here beside you.”

My heart almost burst with happiness at that moment and I couldn’t

prevent the smile from covering my face. I nodded enthusiastically. Frank beamed back at me when he realised I thought his idea was genius. He snatched the pillow without delay and tucked it against his shoulder and neck. His gloved hand uncertainly made its way toward my face and he gently guided my aching head to his shoulder. I let my head fall onto the pillow and just before I fell asleep I felt his hands squeeze my hands tightly and comfortingly.

He was letting me know that I didn't have to suffer in silence anymore.

Caution: Joy May Kill

I stared glumly at the minute hand on the clock desperately waiting for it to move. I swear to God that it hasn't moved in over five minutes. You know what? I bet Markman took the fucking batteries out to ensure the hands on the clock don't move at all. I bet I am doomed to sit here with these morons in this group session forever.

A frustrated sigh escaped my lips and attracted a disapproving look from Markman. I resisted the urge to glower at her. Today was not the day for me to irritate her or to be in her bad books. You see, today was the day I actually needed something from this conniving woman. It was something very important and something only she could help me get. It would not help me in the slightest to annoy her before I got a chance to discuss it with her. Well actually, considering I'm still refraining from speaking, it won't be much of a discussion.

I spent an hour last night writing down what I wanted on a page of my sketch book to hand to her. I tried to be as polite and as thorough as possible in my request. I even drew a picture of what I wanted so there would be no chance of her getting it wrong. It didn't mean that I wasn't worried that she would throw the paper back in my face. I think I've more than earnt such a reaction. I know I'm no angel. I know how much I exasperate Markman. That's why I'm going to go out my way to be nice and helpful to her today. I can be quite charming when I put in an effort.

The rest of the group therapy session dragged by so slow I'm sure time was going backwards. After a while I found myself avoiding looking at the clock purely because of the annoyance it was causing me. However, I stuck to my intention of not pissing off Markman and didn't sigh or make any noises to express my boredom for the rest of the session. I even pretended to listen intently to Ray as he informed us all that, "Change is coming!" I lingered on this message for a while, wondering if he was referring to my forthcoming change in character towards Markman. I didn't linger on this for too long because I quickly came to my senses about Ray's sanity. Or rather, his *lack* of sanity.

Frank sat next to me today. His denim-clad leg was exactly twelve and a half centimetres from my leg, which was also clad in cheap denim. He was idly picking at a hole in his jeans which confirmed my suspicions that he was bored also. I knew exactly how he felt. It felt

good for me though. For so long I've been stuck in this hell-hole continuously surrounded by crazy people. It felt good to finally have someone who wasn't crazy that I could relate to. Frank wasn't crazy, he was just…sad. I'm pretty sure you can cure sadness though. Well, actually, if you can't cure sadness then I would simply find another way to make him better. I was determined to fix him. I didn't care what Jasper said. Jasper was wrong.

Okay, yes, so what if I don't actually know *how* I'm going to fix him? I bet a plumber doesn't know how he's going to fix a leaking sink until he's seen the whole picture and examined all the possible variables. I was just biding my time and waiting until Frank revealed the full picture of himself to me. And by full picture I'm referring to his thoughts and feelings, not his body. Gosh, that was awkward. I can't believe I'd forgotten about the whole shower incident.

Anyway, my point is that even though I didn't know *how* I was going to fix him, I was still confident in my ability to do it.

In this morning's group therapy session I wasn't surprised that Frank elected to speak. I know he often didn't feel comfortable speaking to the whole group but for some reason, at every session, he said something. Even if it was just a sentence on how he was feeling, he always found something to say. I suspected that he wanted Markman to report back to his parents that he was cooperating and trying to get better so they would think about letting him come home. I didn't want Frank to go home. But I wouldn't try to stop him if he did.

"Are you excited about Christmas?" Markman asked Frank. Although Frank had said his obligatory sentence on how he felt "okay," Markman was prompting him about the upcoming consumer holiday.

Frank inhaled and exhaled before he spoke. He nodded about four times but no smile spread across his face as it usually did when he was genuinely excited about something. "Yeah. I guess."

Markman leant forward. "Are you upset about spending Christmas away from your family and loved ones, Frank?"

Markman must be able to read my mind because that is exactly what I had been thinking when I saw the forlorn look on Frank's face. Of course he's not excited about spending Christmas in this nut house. Who would be excited? It's as cold as fuck and the snow is disgusting and dirty. And I'm sure that the heaters will fail again this year, like they tend to do every year around this time. If they fail again I swear I

am getting first pick at blankets. Ray can go fuck himself if he thinks he can get my blankets this year.

Frank shrugged. “Yeah, I guess so,” he replied. He broke Markman’s eye contact and resumed picking at the hole in his jeans. I stared absently at his little fingers and their painfully gnawed fingernails for a while as he plucked and unravelled the blue thread.

“Gerard?”

I addressed Markman politely with my eyes, determined not to be rude or inconsiderate. She looked a little surprised for a split second as I usually ignored her during these sessions. But not today. Today I am going to be good.

“Have you got anything you would like to share with us?” she enquired.

I suddenly became aware that everybody was looking at me again. I feel I should reiterate that my participation in these sessions often nil, so when I did choose to partake in said session, the other individuals became very interested. I am, after all, an exceedingly interesting guy.

I raised a finger to request patience. Then I flipped open my sketch book and wrote down a reply. When I finished writing out my carefully planned response, I began to pick it up to hand to Markman.

“I’ll read it out, if you want?” Frank offered, the interest alight on his face.

I nodded and handed it to him. He read it over quickly first and I felt my heart leap as he smiled in amusement.

“Gerard thinks,” he began, “that there is a lack of Christmas spirit this year.”

It was true, of course. Anyone could see that. There was more life in a Nursing Home than there was in here. However, the fact that I cared that there was no Christmas Spirit was a lie. I seriously could not give a flying fuck about Christmas or anything to do with it. Except if Frank cared….then I would care.

Markman was nodding enthusiastically. “Does anyone else feel this way?” She threw the question out to the group. I was expecting the usual murmurs of agreement but was surprised at how vocal the response was.

There was a chorus of “yeah” and “he’s right”. Fuck, my plan was backfiring. I had just been trying to make it look like I was participating and not being ‘difficult’. I didn’t actually want this to go anywhere.

I cringed down into my seat as Markman began asking for suggestions of ways to increase the Christmas Spirit. Silence settled for a brief moment as people began to ponder. Ray, of course, had to speak first.

“We should put on a Christmas play!” he exclaimed.

I almost threw up in my mouth.

Frank looked sideways at me and laughed. “You brought this on yourself,” he told me. I shook my head unhappily and he understood that I hadn’t meant for it to go this far. Frank’s pretty intuitive. I think he can read my mind too. Oh fuck, I hope he can’t. The poor kid would freak out if he read my thoughts.

Ray’s suggestion was shot down because there wasn’t enough time to organise anything before Christmas. I think I would have shot myself if his idea had gone ahead. There were suggestions for talent shows, and choir performances and all sorts of activities I considered torture. Adam suggested we make Christmas Wreaths out of tree branches. That idea seemed to be popular for a while until Bob spoke up.

“Do you know how much it hurts a tree branch to be severed from its trunk?” he spluttered heatedly.

The wreaths idea got dismissed very quickly after that. I think it was partly because Bob looked so furious at the suggestion that no one dared to challenge him.

The group was leaning more and more toward a torture referred to as Christmas Dress Up. Markman had suggested an activity that involves groups where you make Christmas outfits. In groups of three you have to make costumes of a Christmas tree, a Santa and a giant gift using only different coloured craft paper, glue, scissors and tape.

I thought the idea was fucking ridiculous but everyone else seemed to be rather enthused at the idea. They got even more excited when Markman suggested prizes for the best costumes. This was turning into a fucking disaster. From now on I am never participating at this session. It only ever leads to trouble. I reclaimed my sketch book from Frank’s clenched hands and began to write down another idea. I hadn’t wanted to bring this idea up but anything was better than

Christmas Dress Ups. Frank leant over to see what I was writing.

“Secret Santa,” he announced relieved. “That’s a good idea!” He seemed very surprised and I was offended.

“Presents!” Ray said excited.

“That is a good idea.” Markman reaffirmed what Frank had said. “Who votes we do a Secret Santa?”

The relief radiating from me and Frank alone was so powerful it was almost tangible. I knew he had been horrified at the suggestions of dressing up and having to be touched. And maybe, I’m not sure though, but I think he was scared about the whole group work suggestion. I’d noticed lately that I seemed to be the only person Frank liked to be around.

Me. Yeah I know, fucking crazy kid, eh?

I thought Secret Santa was a good idea. All you had to do was draw a person’s name out of a hat and then give that person a present. Then, you would receive a gift from whoever drew your name out of the hat. Easy as pie, and not personal at *all*.

In my distress at the absurdity of the other’s suggestions, time seemed to have passed very quickly. A quick glance at the clock confirmed that we had gone ten minutes overtime. Although I was remarkably tempted to sprint out of the room, I remembered my plan to be considerate and cooperative towards Markman. I forced myself to stay seated and wait until we were dismissed. It took another five minutes for Markman to end the session which she only did because visiting hours had commenced. She sent everyone off promising to organise a draw for the Secret Santa by the end of the day.

Frank stood and began to walk out but I lingered behind. I had originally planned to exit immediately but I realised another way in which I could get into Markman’s good books. She was kneeling on the ground, shuffling some papers around with her back to me. I glanced around and noticed that everyone had departed and left their chairs in the circle. This was strange because at the beginning of each session we were required to make the circle in the first place. Therefore, my excellent skills of deduction told me that at the end of each session Markman must restack all the chairs and clear the room. It also appeared that no one ever stayed behind to help her.

I reached for the back of my chair and stacked it on top of Frank’s

chair. Then I stacked Ray's, Adam's, Bob's, Bert's, Lisa's and Hayley's chairs on top of Frank's. Once, I deemed this stack too precarious to have any more on it I began another. Soon I had made three stacks of chairs. Two of the stacks had eight chairs in them, and the third had only four. I considered moving some chairs over to make them even but decided against the effort. I pretended to not be surprised by the weight of the first stack of chairs as I began to drag them over to the wall where they would be out of the way. I turned around to walk back to the remaining two stacks and noticed Frank and Markman staring at me.

Why does everyone always get so shocked when I act out of character? It was rather hurtful to see their shocked faces as I did something nice and considerate. Was it really that mind-blowing for me to do something nice? I proceeded to ignore them both and drag the remaining two stacks over to the wall.

What shocked me about this whole situation that just as I am capable of being considerate, Markman is capable of being kind.

"Thank you, Gerard," she said as I walked passed her to exit the room.

I nodded in acknowledgement at her, hoping that she took my nod to mean 'you're welcome'.

Frank and I walked toward the Rec room. Neither of us ever had any visitors so visiting hours was a time we spent together. We sat down next to each other on one of the sofas with the broken seat that constantly collapsed. I didn't mind that the seat was broken. The lack of support on the seat meant Frank and I were often pressed together as heavy objects tended to sink to the middle. He sat on his end of the seat and wrapped one arm over the side to prevent himself from sliding into the middle. I didn't show my disappointment at his decision to hold on and sat down on my usual end.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked.

I feigned hurt, clutching my hand to my chest. He just smiled his coy little smile at my antics and said, "Well?"

I wrote down on my sketch book: 'I'm trying to get into Markman's good books.'

"I noticed," he confirmed.

'You think it worked?' I penned.

“Yeah, I think so. The whole Christmas Spirit thing went well. She looked really pleased and happy with you.”

I chuckled and wrote: ‘That’s a change.’

Frank didn’t return my book straight away after he read what I had written. “Why though, Gerard? What do you want?”

It was a secret. I couldn’t tell Frank what I wanted and why I needed to be in Markman’s good books to be able to get it. It wasn’t like I never kept secrets from Frank before. I had a whole host of secrets locked away in my head. This, however, was a special secret. Although the safety of the world didn’t depend on it, I knew that it was special. To me, anyway. Frank offered me the book back suddenly, as though he realised that I needed it to answer his question. I waved it away and Frank sighed. He knew he wasn’t going to get an answer from me. Not today.

Frank moved his attention from me to the television. I let my eyes linger on his beautiful face for a moment before checking out the TV as well. It was set to a commercial television station and advertisements were flashing across the screen. Did you know that at Omer’s Party Supplies you could get a 6 foot, 650 tip synthetic Christmas Tree for only $35?! Goodness, the things you learn when you watch television. The commercial for Omer’s Party Supplies ended and another immediately begun. There was a young girl sitting on the streets, wearing nothing but a dress and a thin cardigan. I guessed the ad was for some charity and I was right.

“Please donate today to The President’s Christmas Appeal. Help get kids off the streets this Christmas.” The sombre male voice of an announcer filled the room. Then, another man, whom I assumed was the actual President behind the appeal stepped onscreen. He stared imploringly down the camera. When he spoke I suddenly felt very ill. Something about his voice was exceptionally familiar. Even though I don’t remember ever seeing this man before in my life I *remembered* him from somewhere.

“Do you know that man?” I scribbled the words down onto my book so fast they were a mess.

Frank read it and frowned. “That’s the President of the United States, Gerard,” he told me as though it was the most obvious thing in the world.

The President was now reeling off some number to call where people

could pledge money to the cause but I couldn't concentrate on what he was saying. He was in my head and I knew him from somewhere. It wasn't just that he was the President. It was something else.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Zach enter the room. He glanced over at the television for a very long second as the President asked for donations. Then, something seemed to click. I didn't understand what the tragedy was but his face changed almost immediately. His face whipped to me for a terrified second then he literally lunged across the short distance to the television, his hand outstretched to hit the power button. The commercial was almost finished and the only visual was a black screen and some writing, accompanied by a voice over.

All I heard was: "Authorised by the Democratic Party, Washington D.C. Spoken by Donald –."

Zach had managed to hit the power button before the voiceover man had finished his spiel. Frank and I both stared in utter bewilderment at Zach, who was in turn staring at me absolutely terrified. Frank then looked at me seeking enlightenment. He didn't know what I had done either.

I shrugged at Zach but he just swallowed nervously, his eyes going all jittery. I began to get a little defensive. It wasn't my fault that the television was set to that channel. Don't you dare blame me! Why are you looking at me? I didn't change the channel! Why are you looking at me?!

"Dr. Markman is waiting for you now, Gerard," Zach managed to say eventually.

I frowned at him as I walked out of the room, confused. What was so bad that he had to turn the TV off? It was just a commercial for some Christmas Charity Appeal. There are hundreds of them on at this time of year. I hoped Frank would be able to find out what was going on whilst I was gone, because now I was intrigued.

I was polite and knocked on Markman's door instead of barging in like I usually did. She called me in and the first thing I noticed was the way she looked at me as I entered. She was holding her blackberry in her hand and I knew straight away that Zach had informed her about the whole TV incident. My heart sunk. I hope I wasn't going to get into trouble. The day I actually went out of my way to be good may be the day I get into trouble.

However, Markman didn't mention it at all and I wasn't going to bring it up either. I sat down in one of her chairs and refrained from putting my shoes on her furniture. Markman surveyed me as she always did. Her eyes lingered on the scar that split my forehead in half and the guilty, regretful look flashed through her eyes as it always did when she saw it. I wasn't worried; I knew the scar would fade eventually. That plastic surgeon had actually done a remarkable job and the only reason you could see anything at the moment was because it was still healing. I would ask Markman one day why she felt so guilty about my head. It wasn't like she had anything to do with it.

"It pleased me to see you participating today," Markman told me.

Ha, my plan was working. I nodded.

"And thank you for stacking the chairs."

I nodded again and caught myself just before I smiled at her.

"Why the sudden change?"

I knew she was a smart cookie. She knew that my deeds were out of character so something was up. This conversation was going exactly like I had planned it in my head.

I opened my sketch book and pulled out the first piece of paper I had written last night. All I had written on this piece was: 'I need something.'

Markman accepted the paper and I noticed her painted nails. She hadn't painted her nails in months. It wasn't strange as such, just…..different. I was so busy looking at her nails I missed her expression as she read my sentence. This threw my plan out the window. The next piece of paper I gave her depended on her facial expression. How would I know what piece of paper to give her if I missed seeing her expression?

Fuck me and fuck her nails.

"What sort of something?" she inquired.

I pulled my pencil and answered her question: 'A favour.'

"What sort of favour?"

I sighed and printed: 'I need you to get something for me.' I was just

about to hand it over when I hastily remembered to add a please onto the end. ‘Please.’

I thought back for a moment and tried to remember if I had ever asked her for anything. I didn’t recall ever asking Markman for anything. She owed me this one.

“Okay,” she said.

I blinked at her. Did she just say okay? Did she say yes? I think I’m dreaming.

“But….”

Fuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuck. I had the pencil between my teeth and bit down on it crossly. Of course there had to be a “but”. She couldn’t just say yes, could she? I frowned at her.

“I will do my best to get what you want, Gerard,” she said calmly, “but you need to do something for me in return. Okay?”

I grunted refusing to commit. I don’t think I wanted to enter into a deal with this lady. Who knows what she was going to get me to do in return. I folded my arms angrily and without thinking I tucked my feet up on her furniture. She didn’t even bat an eyelid. She just kept staring at me whilst I warred internally over my dilemma.

I really, really wanted to say yes. You see the thing that I needed Markman to get for me was a Christmas present for Frank. I had missed his birthday so I was making an extra special effort for Christmas this year. I knew it would be his first Christmas away from his family so I wanted to make it suck a little less.

I stared at a framed painting on the wall for a long time as I thought up my answer. I come into this office all the time but I don’t think I’ve ever looked at this painting properly. It was really good, I thought. There was a highly defined figure in the middle of the frame. The expression of his face was absolute terror. He was standing in a massive room with white walls that was completely empty. The walls and floors seemed to stretch on forever. Compared to the rest of the room he was tiny. Along one wall there was a door that was partially open. Just above the door handle on the partially open door there were four finger curled around the frame. That’s all you could see. Just four fingers. You couldn’t see the person or the monster that belonged to the fingers, so I could only imagine what was on the other end. It frightened me because it reminded me very vividly of *them*. I

could imagine myself standing in this massive white room coming to the terrifying realisation that *they* were coming in and I had no way to get out. I stood up and walked over to the painting to get a better look. My stomach churned as I realised that all around the frame of the window in the painting there were more fingers. On the window frame and sill alone I counted four more sets of fingers curled over the wood.

I turned away suddenly, my heart pounding and sweat dripping down my back. I forced myself to take a few deep breaths. I was safe as long as I didn't open my mouth like the boy in the frame. He was standing in the middle of the room with his mouth open. I knew he had broken his silence and *they* had found him. Whoever painted this had an uncanny way of getting inside my head. I pointed at it and Markman realised I was asking who the artist was.

She seemed to pause for a moment as she tossed the name around in her head. "The boy who painted that was a very dear patient and friend of mine. He suffered from schizophrenia."

I noticed that Markman had said this boy "was" a patient so I asked Markman where this patient was now. I wondered if maybe he had been cured. Or perhaps *they* had gotten to him. What a terrifying thought.

Markman just gazed sadly at me and didn't answer my question. I swallowed awkwardly. I guessed he must've died after all.

While Markman was reminiscing I took the opportunity to find my idea for Frank's present that I had drawn and described in detail last night. Before I handed it over I wrote on the paper: 'What do you want in return?'

Markman opened her desk drawer and pulled out an egg timer and set it down on the desk. It was white and about the size of the palm of my hand. It had large numbers all around the edges that went all the way up to sixty. "My only request is that from now on you have to stay in my office for our sessions for a minimum of forty minutes." Markman glanced at her watch and twisted the timer so that the little black line pointed to the twenty. "You have been here this afternoon for twenty minutes already. So I'm setting it to the remaining twenty minutes."

Jeez this woman has got me all figured out. The last month or so, if I bothered turning up to these sessions at all, I tended to only remain in the room for about five minutes. I had better things to do than sit and

listen to Markman preach and beg and plead and lecture and shout and scold and talk. I guess, though, it could've been worse. She could've put me on kitchen duty or something. I think I can survive forty minutes. The egg timer was a good idea too. That way I can keep an eye on the time and count down the minutes.

I nodded my consent to our deal and Markman looked pleased. I finally surrendered my important piece of paper to her. I had written all about how I felt guilty about missing Frank's birthday and how I wanted to make it up to him by getting him a Christmas Present. I acknowledged that I understood that usually for gifts in this place we exchanged handmade cards and art projects but I wanted something more for Frank this time.

It wasn't anything big or expensive. I thought it was thoughtful, if anything. I didn't think that Markman would understand but that wasn't important. I knew it would mean a lot to Frank.

Markman finished reading my letter and she was now examining my sketch. Yeah, I'd actually used a page of my sketch book to sketch something on!

"I think this is a fabulous idea."

Did I hear her right?

"This drawing is very good too. I'll take this home with me tonight and give it to my son. He'll know where to find something like this, I'm sure."

Hang on, Markman has a son?! Since when? This information was new and floored me. If she had a son, she must be married. If she's married she must have a husband. Jesus. How can *she* be married and be having sex and making babies when I'm still not getting any?! Talk about unfair.

I brushed aside this new piece of information. I would dissect and digest it later. All I could focus on at the moment is refraining from hugging Markman. I really didn't think she would be so open and willing to help me. After all, I have been an arse to her over the past year or so. I grinned widely and wrote out a thank you for her to read.

"You're welcome."

I checked the timer. I had eleven minutes left in the session before I could go. I hummed the jingle to Omer's Party Supplies in my head. It

went a little like this: ‘Da da da daaaaa da daaaaa da ba bup da bup.’ It’s really catchy actually.

Markman pulled out a two pairs of scissors and few pieces of paper. She had the names of everyone printed onto the paper for the Secret Santa. Without being asked I picked up a piece of paper and began to cut the slips of paper out. I cut out Frank’s and was sorely tempted to accidentally ‘lose’ it but decided against it. I supposed I could allow someone else to get him a present. I was concentrating so hard on cutting along the lines that I got a fright when the egg timer went off with a “driiiing.”

I placed all my papers into the box and nodded goodbye to Markman. Frank met me down the hall. “Did you get in trouble?” he asked immediately.

I shook my head and grinned.

Frank looked relieved. “You know Zach rang Markman as soon as you left the room. It was weird.”

It was extremely weird. I prompted Frank to hear what else he had to say. Frank thought for a moment. “Well Zach told Markman that you had seen the Christmas Appeal Ad. Then she said something and he answered, ‘I don’t think so.’”

I thought for a long moment. I didn’t understand but I didn’t think I was going to crack the mystery when I was so hungry. I led the way to the cafeteria. Markman and Ben were standing on one side of the cafeteria and there was a small crowd mobbing them. I knew it was for the Secret Santa but I would worry about that later. Frank and I lined up and I collected a bowl of soup. I was pretty confident it was tomato, considering it was blood red but this place is known for its dodgy food. I grabbed three pieces of bread and waited for Frank as he did the same, except that he had selected Pumpkin soup.

We sat down at our table and began to eat as both of us were ravenous. And yeah, I’ve changed my mind. This wasn’t *my* table anymore. It was *our* table now. When Frank’s soft slurping noises stopped, I stopped as well. Then, without words or measured looks, we slid our bowls across the table towards each other. I liked tomato soup but I liked pumpkin just as much. I found out not long ago that Frank was in the same situation. We each finished half of our bowl before we swapped and finished each others. It was nice. I liked it. It was our thing.

After dinner Frank and I went over to draw our Secret Santa's. Ben held the box up over Frank's head so he couldn't see. Frank went up on his tip-toes to draw a slip of paper. After a quick look over his shoulder at where I was standing he looked at the paper. He showed it to Markman who wrote it down. She took the paper off him and tossed it out. Then it was my turn. Although I saw Christmas as an excuse for retailers to mark up goods and for people to go stupid I couldn't help but feel a tiny bit excited. I opened the slip of paper.

Adam.

What the fuck would Adam want for Christmas? I don't even know anything about Adam except that he got abducted by aliens. I bit my lip as I thought. This was going to be tough. I liked challenges though. I liked working my brain. It's a pretty fucking fantastic brain, you know?

Frank seemed really happy. He was almost bouncing as we made our way back to our table. "Who'd you get?" he asked suddenly. Then he changed his mind. "No, don't tell me. I won't tell you who I got. Don't tell me, okay?"

I didn't raise an eyebrow at him like I normally would have. I wanted him to be happy like this all the time.

***

Markman came through on her end of the deal to get Frank's present for me. Every second day for two weeks I sat, as required, for forty minutes in Markman's office for our sessions. Sometimes the time went really quick because we would be having interesting conversations or discussions. It was actually quite rare for me to be staring at the timer. There was always something for us to do. One day we played scrabble. Yeah, seriously. We played scrabble. She won, but only because I was stuck with the 'x' at the end and had to add ten points onto my score. That day I stayed in her office well past the ding of the timer.

Today was Christmas Eve and I was slightly anxious that Markman hadn't updated me on Frank's present for a while now. I hope she hadn't forgotten. But at the end of the session she pulled out the box

from under her desk. I leapt up out of seat and accepted it gratefully. I opened it carefully and looked inside. It was perfect. It was exactly what I wanted. Markman noted the pleased look on my face and she wiped her brow exaggeratedly and exhaled, “Phew! Glad I got that right.”

I nodded enthusiastically. I spent the rest of the session cross-legged on the floor carefully wrapping Frank’s gift. I picked green wrapping paper that had little candy canes all over it. As the timer dinged I stood, clutching the gift to my chest.

I wish I could speak right now because I wanted to say thank you to Markman. Instead I settled for mouthing the words at her which seemed to have just as much impact. I ran back to my room as fast as I could and hid the present under my bed under a stack of clothes so Frank wouldn’t see it.

It seemed the cooks were in a good mood today as well because they made roast chicken for dinner. Frank’s mood had gone down again, despite the fact that it was Christmas Eve. I gazed sadly at him as he picked at his vegetables. It hurt me to see him this sad. I wish I knew how to turn back time so I could go back to the day when he met those men. Unfortunately, the key to time travel isn’t one of my secrets.

That night I dreamt of Frank again. It was some crazy dream involving candy canes and chickens and how even despite the ridiculously funny image of them dancing together, Frank wouldn’t smile. My dream dissipated as I awoke due to something touching my left foot. In the darkness I blinked rapidly struggling to make out the dark figure on the end of my bed. Ludicrously, for a brief moment I thought it was Santa.

“Sorry.” Not Santa; Frank.

I sat up and Frank moved into the moonlight that gushed in through the window above my bed.

“It’s two am,” he informed me, reading my mind.

Merry Christmas! I wrote this down and handed it to Frank who smiled for the first time in a while. “Sorry I woke you,” he said.

I shook my head. I didn’t mind. I didn’t think it was fair that I was sleeping when Frank wasn’t. My heart leapt suddenly as I remembered Frank present under my bed. I grinned and wrote: ‘I have something

for you.'

The glee on Frank's face was identical to that of a child on Christmas morning faced who was with a tree surrounded by presents. "Me too!" he exclaimed and ran from my room.

I crawled under my bed to grab Frank's present. It had gotten pushed to the very back corner and I couldn't find it for a moment as the black shirt covering it hid it from view. I shimmied back out just as Frank was coming back.

"It's nothing much," he told me. "And I had to get Markman's help."

I stifled a laugh. Frank suddenly understood. "Is that why you were being so nice to Markman? So she would help you?"

I grinned in agreement and Frank grinned back.

"Open yours first," Frank demanded and thrust the parcel at me. I knew better than to argue. I ripped the paper off and gasped. It was the paint set I'd seen on TV about a month ago. It had ten different colours and five different size brushes and it was perfect. I'd only been able to use pencils and crappy water colours before but now I had proper paint. I clutched it to my chest already imagining all the beautiful things I was going to paint. There was a tube of white paint as well so I could mix it with the red to make pink. My head ran over the million possible colours I could create and the billion pictures I could capture.

I smiled so big at Frank my cheeks ached. I held out Frank's present and he accepted it, the moonlight bouncing off the candy canes on the wrapper. He ripped the paper of his gift faster than I had done on mine. He practically threw the lid off the box and delved his hands inside.

"Oh. Gerard."

He took the gloves out of the box and slid them onto his hands. They fit perfectly as I knew they would. He held his hands under the moonlight and wiggled his fingers. The skeleton fingers on the back glowed in the dim light.

"I *love* them. I don't think I'm going to take them off now. You know that right? Ever. I'll just cut the fingers off in summer or something."

I grinned and nodded. That was the plan.

Frank let the empty box slide of the bed as he crawled closer to me.

“Merry Christmas, Gerard.”

‘Tis The Season

I have a problem.

I didn’t get Adam anything for the Secret Santa.

I’m a terrible person. I actually feel quite bad about it.

I shared this information with Frank as we made our way to the enormous Christmas lunch they provided us with every year. They always go all out on Christmas; try to make us forget that we’re all crazy and locked up in a mental institution. Well, I’m not crazy, and neither is Frank… but everyone else is.

Frank sighed and put on his disappointed face. That’s when I felt *really* bad. Adam’s disappointment I could live with, but I always had a hard time coping with Frank’s.

I hate Christmas.

I picked up a plate and joined the queue for food. As I stood in line I went back over everything I knew about Adam in my head. He was male. He was 17. He had been abducted by aliens whilst swimming. Not much to work with. Ray was standing in front of me and I stared absently at a symmetrical black smudge on his denim jacket. It was located directly between where I’d imagine his shoulder blades to be. I suddenly wished I had been bothered to attend the craft sessions that had been held recently. If I had attended maybe I could’ve figured out what Adam liked. Then I might’ve had something to work with.

Ray stepped up to the counter and peeled the aluminium foil off a large platter of potatoes. As I watched him do that I swear a light bulb went off over my head with a resounding ding. It was *exactly* like what happens with the cartoon characters in Saturday morning cartoons.

After I got my lunch I rushed back to my table and whipped out my sketch book. I wrote down what I needed Frank to get for me. I would get it myself but to do that I needed to exercise my vocal cords. It would take a pretty big deal for me to speak again and risk discovery by *Them*, especially after what happened last time. Before Frank even had a chance to sit down I handed him the paper and removed his

plate of food from his hand. He read the paper, gave me an annoyed and exasperated look and walked back over toward the food counter. I watched keenly as he leant over the counter and talked to one of the cafeteria ladies. I smacked the table gleefully as Frank obtained the roll of aluminium foil I'd requested and walked hastily back to me.

"Happy?" he asked, slapping the roll down hard into my outstretched palm. It was quite obvious that he was peeved at me.

I nodded seriously and relinquished his plate of food that I had been holding hostage. I predicted that in exactly two minutes Frank would forget about being peeved at me and become intrigued as to why I had held his lunch hostage. I scoped the room, looking for Adam and spotted him sitting over at one of the far tables. That was very beneficial because I had until the end of this session to craft his Christmas present and the further away he was, the better.

"What are you making?' Frank asked two minutes later as I unrolled about a metre of the foil across my lap. I was using the table as a shield to prevent Adam's eyes from seeing what I was doing.

It wasn't going to be the best Secret Santa Christmas present in the world but I was hoping it would be enough for Adam. I had decided I was going to make Adam a hat. I think it was Ray who told me that alien technology couldn't penetrate through foil hats, which subsequently meant alien species couldn't read your mind.

Cool, huh? Well, you know, it would be, if it wasn't a load of bullshit.

However, I didn't have the luxury of being sceptical at the moment. It was my own fault for not getting Adam a present sooner. I fashioned the foil into a round bowl shape; the circumference of the bowl being what I'd estimated the circumference of Adam's head to be. I made the hat deep as well, so Adam wouldn't have to worry about it falling off.

The whole time I was doing this Frank was watching me with a faint look of incredulity on his face. Even as he ate he maintained the look perfectly. When I finished I held it up for Frank to see and he raised a doubtful eyebrow at my beautiful creation.

I scowled at him and tucked my creation under the table out of sight. I hoped at least someone else had forgotten to get a present as well, so mine wouldn't look so bad.

I practically shoved the rest of my lunch down as everyone began to pack up to get ready for the gift exchange. I grabbed the foil hat and

took my seat in the circle, ignoring the strange looks I was receiving. Frank sat next to me, like he always did, whether he was angry with me or not.

Ray sat on my other side and elbowed me in the arm. “Good idea!” he whispered, nodding to the hat I held in my hands.

Really? Ray thought it was a good idea? I stared at him, searching his face for any hint of mockery. But there was none. I suddenly felt a little bit better about my present.

I glanced around the circle. Bob had a beautiful blue flower resting across his lap. Ray was holding a messily wrapped package. Hayley was holding a single piece of paper to her chest, hiding the picture on the other side from prying eyes. The skeleton fingers on Frank’s gloves were wrapped protectively around his present.

The gift exchange went surprisingly well. Hayley started by giving her gift to Bert. Then Bert stood up and presented his gift to Bob. Bob then rose to his feet, the blue flower held in his hands as though it were an infant’s frail body. He walked over to Frank who, I noticed, had stopped breathing. Bob held out the flower to Frank, a joyful, but incredibly chaste look upon his face. Frank, who remembered to breathe again with a gasp, accepted the rose.

“Thank you, Bob,” he said softly.

I wondered where Bob had gotten the flower, but I didn’t particularly care. I knew that no matter how beautiful the flower was it would never be as beautiful as Frank. No matter how hard that flower tried, it would never compare. Not in my eyes anyway.

I wasn’t paying attention when Adam approached me with his present.

“I’m sorry, Gerard,” he muttered. “I didn’t know what to get you.” He held out the pencil to me as though it were burning his fingers. I plucked it from his jittery hands and inspected it. It was just a normal pencil, like the hundred others I had scattered around my room. Instead of showing my disappointment I dug inside my jacket pocket for an old pencil I’d stowed away in there last week. It was my favourite pencil but I had sharpened it down to an inch long stump. It was useless now, or so I’d thought. I showed Adam the pencil stump and tried to explain to him that I needed a new pencil so his gift was perfect. To prove the point, I tucked Adam’s pencil inside the binder of my sketch book. That cheered Adam up immensely and he went back to his seat smiling again. As I tucked the sketch book back inside

my pocket I made sure no one saw the three other pencils I had stored away.

It was my turn then to give Adam his present. Embarrassed, I held out the hat to Adam and he took it, staring at in wonder. The only noise in the room came from the scrunching of the foil as Adam inspected the hat. It was kind of like he had *no fucking idea* what it was. It was a very awkward situation and I felt like an idiot. Everyone was staring at me and my stupid present. I swallowed the lump in my throat and dropped my eyes to the floor.

“Let me show you,” Ray exclaimed and leapt from his seat. He stood in front of Adam and took the hat from Adam’s hands. Ray set the hat down carefully, moulding the foil to the shape of Adam’s head so it fit better. “Now they can’t read your mind,” he informed Adam in such a matter-of-fact way I was taken aback.

Adam looked in childish amazement between me and Ray. “This will stop them?” he inquired incredulously as though he couldn’t believe his ears.

I shrugged and then nodded. Adam *beamed* at me like I had just given him a million dollars. It then took me 0.1 of a second to get back to my seat and out of the spotlight. What an *ordeal*. Thank God it’s another year until we have to do this again.

I hate Christmas.

My behaviour this session must’ve made up for my behaviour at lunch because after I sat down Frank’s gloved hand suddenly landed on my thigh. He let his hand linger for a brief second; long enough for me to realise it was intentional. Then, as quickly as it had made contact with my leg, his hand disappeared back into his own personal bubble. I turned to stare at Frank but he avoided my gaze and stared at his blue flower instead.

The Secret Santa was over and Frank and I returned to our table. We had just sat down when Ray announced his presence and requested to sit with us.

“Please?” he begged, as though sitting at our table would cure cancer or something.

Frank looked to me, and I looked to Ray. I didn’t really want to say “yes,” but I didn’t really have a good reason why I should say no. Frank was always pestering me to be nicer to Ray. Also, Ray was

really helpful with Adam's present. I did kinda owe him. So I sighed and nodded.

That was a bad idea. I knew I should've done what *I* wanted to do. Why? Because precisely two minutes after Ray sat down, Bob came up to the table and asked if he could join us. So, I had to say yes. I couldn't exactly say no. Not after allowing Ray to sit at my table. I nodded again, extremely reluctantly, and Bob sat down.

I unleashed the gates of hell. I'm a fucking idiot. Once Adam and Bert saw that I'd allowed Bob and Ray to sit with us they rushed over to the table like bugs to a light. We had to reshuffle the seating arrangements but we eventually ended up with all six of us crammed onto a table that rarely saw more than two occupants. I was sitting in the middle on one bench with Frank next to me on one side and Ray on the other. Bob, Adam and Bert occupied the opposite bench.

Ray had grabbed the leftover foil and was making more hats. He'd obviously had more experience with the project than I had because his were ten times better. Adam and Bert were helping him eagerly with Bert even asking if they'd hide him from his 'Godzilla.' Frank was discussing his flower with Bob. That left me. I was talking to no one. No one was talking to me.

No one wanted to talk to me anymore.

Who am I kidding?

It wasn't that no one wanted to talk to me *anymore*; it was that no one *ever* wanted to talk to me in the *first place*.

Except Markman. She always wanted to talk to me. But she doesn't count. She gets *paid* to talk to me.

"Adam and Ray, your parents are here." Zach interrupted my pity party. On Christmas Day a lot a parents turned up around mid-afternoon to visit their kids. Well, the parents that *cared*.

Adam and Ray scampered off to meet their parents excitedly, leaving just four at the table. That pleased me slightly. If this situation were an equation then it would be solved if we lost another fifty per cent of the variables.

Bob's mother turned up ten minutes later and Bert chose very wisely to leave the table with Bob. I think he remembered our first meeting. The meeting where I'd told him that if he sat at my table ever again I

would tell ‘Godzilla’ where he was. Gosh, I’m such an asshole.

Frank moved back to the other side of the table so we were facing each other again. I preferred to sit this way, purely because it was easier to see his perfect face. Frank had gone subdued again now that everyone had left and had taken to staring blankly out the window. It was snowing very lightly outside, I noticed, as I looked to where Frank was staring. I pulled my sketch book out of my pocket and slid Adam’s pencil out. My sketch book was everything to me. I think I would die if anything happened to it.

I flipped to a new page and pressed the pencil to the paper. I had decided on my next project. I was going to sketch Frank. And I was going to do it properly this time, as opposed to the terrible drawing I did of him the first time I saw him. I studied Frank for a few seconds then I dropped my eyes back down to transfer what I had seen onto the paper. My head bobbed up and down rapidly as I memorised a line and then sketched it on the paper. It took a while for Frank to realise what I was doing and when he did he was horrified.

“No, no. Don’t draw me. Please. I’m not a good model. I’m not good enough or beautiful enough. I’m too….”

I stared at Frank intensely. I knew the word that was poised on his pale lips. Ugly. He was going to call himself ugly. But I wasn’t going to let him. It wasn’t true. I wasn’t going to let him tell me such a blatant lie.

I eventually stared him down and the poisonous word disappeared from his lips. He went silent and folded his arms. Instead of protesting, he watched me work, a reproachful look upon his face. It made me ridiculously happy to be able to attempt to capture him on paper so I was indifferent to his lack of enthusiasm.

However, as the minutes passed and as my picture became more defined, Frank’s judgmental attitude seemed to disappear. He stared at my drawing, watching himself come to life on the paper. Every time I looked up at Frank he would look up too and we would make eye contact. *Every time.* I know it sounds really pathetic and stupid but every look we exchanged made my heart thump hard in my chest.

“Your parents are here, Frank.” Ben seemed to materialise next to the table and addressed Frank.

Frank’s head jerked up towards the glass sliding doors so fast I’m surprised he didn’t get whiplash. He half stood up in his seat to get a

better look. My heart sunk so low in my body I felt sick. I knew I needed to leave Frank alone for a while. It had been a long time since he had seen his parents and I knew I would just cramp everyone's style. I jotted down a note to Frank on a scrap of paper and packed my things up. I stood up and slid the piece of paper across to Frank. He scanned the note which informed him that I would give him some time alone with his parents. When Frank didn't react to what I had written I began to walk past him toward my room. I had just passed Frank when he reflexively spun around and seized my arm, pulling me off-balance and back toward the table.

"Don't leave. Please stay with me." As soon as Frank finished speaking I nodded. The sick feeling in my stomach intensified as I realised that Frank wasn't simply *asking* me to stay with him, he was literally begging me.

At Frank's request I sat next to him. Already I was predicting the awkwardness. Frank's parents wouldn't want me here. I knew it. I swallowed several times and wondered what Markman was telling Frank's parents. She had intercepted them before they had come into the cafeteria and they had all been talking for the past five minutes.

Now, I'd never met Frank's parents before and I knew nothing about them. Despite this I still had an image in my head of what I expected they would be like. All I knew was that they were ignorant and that they were ashamed of what had happened to Frank. As they entered the cafeteria and began to cover the distance to the table I studied them. Frank's mom was nothing like I had pictured her in my head. I'd been thinking of her as an upper-class snob who dressed in expensive designer clothes. But she wasn't. She looked like a regular mom. She was wearing a plain blue dress and a thick cardigan over her shoulders. Frank's father, on the other hand was wearing a suit. It was Christmas Day and he was visiting his son in a mental institution; his choice of attire confused me. He wasn't going to a meeting or an expensive restaurant. Who was he looking to impress? Did he think that people wouldn't judge him if he looked important? Or, I suspected, he was dressed up to distract people from that fact that he was so obviously ashamed to be here.

"Frank!" Frank's mom, on the other hand, looked genuinely happy to be here. The authentic delight she took in seeing her son again seemed to rub off on Frank because he was smiling as he greeted her.

She stopped as she got to the table and held out her hands. That was when I realised what it was that Markman had told Frank's parents.

She told them about Frank's strong aversion to being touched. Markman had advised them against trying to hug or embrace Frank in any way. Frank held out his gloved hands to his mother and she held them tightly in her own, smiling sadly at her son. When she let go, Frank turned to his father who extended a hand stiffly. Frank and his father shook hands uncomfortably, something I assumed they'd never done before.

Once Frank's parents had sat down opposite Frank and I, Frank introduced me. "Mom. Dad," he said, looking to each of them in turn. "This is my friend, Gerard."

Frank's mom greeted me warmly and I felt a surge of affection towards her. Frank's father, however, was as cold as the thin layer of ice that covered all of the cafeteria windows. I decided I didn't like him.

Frank began describing an average day for his parents, at his mother's request. "Tell me everything," she had said.

I pulled Adam's pencil out of my pocket and turned it over absent-mindedly in my hands as Frank spoke. It was interesting listening to Frank describe a day. It made me wonder if he was actually residing in the same place as me.

Frank's mom commented in all the right places. I considered her as she interacted with Frank. Her answers seemed a little too premeditated and cautious. She was afraid. Afraid of saying the wrong thing. I could almost smell her guilt. It wasn't just the typical guilt of a mother who'd had her son confined to a mental institution. As far as I could tell in my head, she wasn't guilty about what had happened to Frank, but more about her ignorance after it had occurred.

She was keeping a secret and it was driving me crazy trying to figure it out.

"Dr. Markman says you're getting better," Frank's mom said brightly, changing the subject from the food to Frank's health.

Frank and I both started. Why would she say that? We both knew that Frank had a long way to go yet. She was the fucking doctor, shouldn't she know that?

"You might be able to come home soon."

I stopped fingering the pencil and stared hard at the pattern etched

into the metal table. I knew where this conversation was going. I felt sick again.

Frank remained silent for a moment, thinking as hard as I was staring. “I guess,” he said.

Frank’s father decided to intervene, and I seriously wished he hadn’t. “But everyone’s missing you,” he said.

“Who?” Frank snapped. He knew that he had no friends at home. No one would be asking about him.

“Everyone. You know? The neighbours and some family friends. Everyone misses you.”

I squeezed the pencil in my hand and kept my eyes trained down.

Next to me, Frank’s leg twitched angrily. “What did you tell them?” he inquired, his voice level and measured.

“What do you mean?” Frank’s mom realised the situation had gone sour and was desperately trying to calm the waters.

“Did you tell them I was at an expensive Swiss boarding school? Or am I staying with an uncle in Canada? Oh, oh, I know, I’m at an all-boys elite finishing school on the other side of the country, aren’t I?” Frank’s voice was dripping with sarcasm.

I was going with option three.

Frank’s parents didn’t reply and my heart sunk. I hated it when I was right about terrible things like this. Why couldn’t I be right about the lottery numbers so I could bribe my way out of this hell hole?

“Well?” Frank asked, looking at them both.

“Stop being silly,” Frank’s father snapped.

Frank’s mother pursed her lips and shot Frank’s father a filthy look. I suddenly had another brainwave as to what Frank’s mom’s secret was. But I didn’t want to think about it. I don’t think Frank could handle hearing that right now. I glanced at her hands and my worst fears were confirmed.

“I’m not being silly,” Frank said begrudgingly.

“Yes, you are. You’re always being silly. You’re silly and you don’t

think and then you get yourself into situations. If you just grew up and acted your age for once in your life, we wouldn't be here."

Frank's mom reached across the table and grabbed Frank's hands. "He didn't mean that, honey. It's not your fault. Frank, we under—."

"—where's your wedding ring?" Frank blurted out, looking from his mother's hands to her face accusingly.

Frank's father was too slow and didn't move his hands under the table in time. Frank glanced to him and instantly spotted that his father's wedding band was absent also. All that you could see was the small strip of skin on his ring finger that was paler than the rest. Frank withdrew his hands under the table and clutched them together, slightly panicky.

"Wh-wha-what? Why? What's going on?" he asked.

Ever since this visit had commenced, I'd noticed that Frank was becoming more and more visibly upset. His eyes were going red and his chin was trembling. It wasn't like he was beginning to cry, it was more that he was trying to bottle up too much emotion for his little body to handle. I suddenly wished that Frank's parents would leave.

"Don't you love each other anymore?" he questioned, clearly distressed.

"We're just trialling a separation," Frank's mother replied gently.

"How long? Since when?"

"Oh, I don't know. It's not clear, sweetie," she lied.

"It happened after I left, wasn't it? Don't lie to me!" he exclaimed as his mother began to shake her head.

"Yes, Frank. We separated one month after you came here," Frank's father said brusquely.

"It's my fault," Frank stated. Frank's parents didn't answer as quickly as I'd hoped they would. "Oh, God," Frank moaned, resting his head on his hands and hiding his face from us all.

"See what you did?" Frank's mother snapped.

"Oh, it's my fault? He didn't want us to lie to him. If you want to keep treating him like a baby, go ahead. He needs to grow up and stand up

for himself." Frank's father banged his fist on the table angrily.

"How dare you say that?! How dare you!"

"It's my salary paying for this place and I'll say what I want. If *you'd* paid more attention to the kind of people he was hanging out with…." Frank's father left the sentence open but it needed no interpretation.

I suddenly became aware that my bottom jaw was on the floor. Well, not literally, but I was so dumbfounded it felt like it. I couldn't believe what I was seeing and hearing. Frank's parents were in the middle of a full-blown argument over who was to blame for Frank's rape. If anyone was to blame it was the sick bastards who did it in the first place. Neither of Frank's parents had even tried to console Frank or explain the terms of their separation. I clenched my fist around the pencil furiously and ground my teeth together.

"Oh, now it's my fault!? I was working just the same as you. You are just as responsible as me."

"Hardly. If you didn't mother him so much, maybe he wouldn't have turned out to be such a—." Frank's father was cut off by an indignant exclamation from Frank's mother.

Next to me, Frank began to cry, but I knew that neither of his parents noticed. They were too busy in their own little world to care. I realised now why they hadn't noticed Frank's odd behaviour after the rape. They were too selfish and self-interested to care about their son. People like this shouldn't have children. Not if they can't look after them properly.

The pencil I'd been holding in my hands snapped in half as I clenched it furiously. I slammed the pieces of wood and graphite onto the surface of the table with a surprisingly loud bang. I knew what I had to do. I didn't have a choice.

"STOP!" I yelled and rose to my feet, irately. I knew my actions in the next minute would cost me but I didn't care. I was doing this for Frank's sake.

Frank's father rose to meet me. "I don't know who you think you are, boy, but you need to keep out of other's business," he snarled, shaking his pointer finger at me menacingly.

I stalked around the table to stand face to face with Frank's father. I was the same height as him, thankfully. "Leave," I demanded. "Leave

this place, now."

"Don't you threaten me," he spat, using his finger to poke me hard in the chest.

It took every bone of self-control in my body not to grab his finger and snap it in half. I knew I could do it. I could probably break his wrist too. In one swift movement I could have him writhing on the floor. But I didn't. The anger that had risen up to my face from my feet stayed contained as I glared at the man who had made Frank so sad on a day that was supposed to be happy.

"You are going to leave this place. And you will not come back unless Frank specifically invites you to. You will leave here and let Frank get on with his life. You will leave. Now. You have no right to come in here and act in such a way that has clearly left Frank upset and distressed. There is no one to blame for what happened to Frank except those individuals who perpetrated the horrendous act. You, nor your wife, nor Frank is to blame for what happened. What happened to Frank is nothing to be ashamed of, but it has become quite clear to me that your common sense has been clouded by your own selfishness and greed. I suggest you wake up from your stupor and realise that you have an extraordinary son."

I stopped to take a breath and brace myself for Frank's father's rejoinder but it never came. He actually looked quite shocked, instead of angry. He looked down at Frank who was now staring at the both of us and swallowed loudly. Frank's eyes were wet with tears and I knew that Frank's father realised now that it was him who put those tears there. Frank's father stepped back from me and looked to his wife. Then, without a word, the two of them left, subdued and embarrassed.

As soon as they had left the room I looked around. Everyone was staring at me. Again. In addition to these looks, I noticed that Ben and Zach were standing cautiously close to the table. It was almost as though they were preparing to break up a fight. Surely they didn't think that I would hurt Frank's father did they? Only one person in the room was moving and it was someone I hadn't seen in a while.

Jasper was weaving his way through the tables towards me, shaking his head with a horrified expression plastered to his grave face. Every few steps he would look over his shoulder.

I knew who he was checking for.

They were coming. And I knew that this time *they* would get me. I'd manage to escape *them* once. No one is that lucky twice. I clapped my hand over my mouth, terrified, and scanned all the windows. I was expecting to see their fingers curling over the window sill at any moment.

I heard the flurry of movement to my left and snapped my head to see. Frank had climbed off the seat and had sprinted off towards the west wing. Jasper reached me and grabbed my arm roughly.

"*They* saw everything. *They* know about him. *They're* coming to get him too."

The dread and fear overwhelmed me for a second as I realised what I had done. I needed to save him. It was up to me. *They* were coming for me and *they* were going to use Frank to do it. I turned on my heels and sprinted urgently after Frank, ignoring the people behind me who called my name and reached out for my arm. My legs pumped with fresh adrenaline as I ran straight for Frank's room and slammed the door open, urgently calling Frank's name.

But his room was empty and that could mean one of two things. The first option flitted through my head but I physically made my brain stop from thinking about the second option. Instead I acted on the first one and headed around the corner for the showers, praying to every God I'd ever heard off that Frank was in there.

I didn't know which God came through on me, but I didn't care. All I cared about was that the first thing I saw when I opened the door was Frank. He was standing, fully clothed, under the shower stream, shivering uncontrollably. I darted inside the shower and jammed the door shut behind me. A jammed door wouldn't stop *them*, but it might slow them down. Or rather, I hoped it would slow *them* down.

I rushed over to Frank, a new sense of urgency overtaking me. *They* hadn't gotten to Frank yet. That meant I still had a chance to protect him. I would do anything if it meant he would be safe. I would give myself up if *they* left him alone. It was too late to run away now. I'd have to bargain. My life for Frank's. I didn't even have to think about it. I'd automatically decided that I would do it.

The water coming out of the shower head was glacial cold and within a few seconds of standing under the stream with Frank my teeth were chattering uncontrollably and my clothes were plastered to my skin.

"Frank, we have to get out of here."

Frank just blinked at me indifferently.

“Please. *They’re* coming.”

Now I got a reaction out of Frank. Horror crossed his face and I hated that I’d scared him. He reached out for me and grabbed my arms, pulling me closer to him. His fingers, still covered in sopping wet gloves, moved to touch my lips.

“No, no, no, no, no, no, no.” He kept repeated the syllable over and over again as he touched my lips. “Why did you open your mouth, Gerard? Why did you do it?”

I was about to answer Frank but he stopped me. “Don’t you know what this means?” he asked, his words barely distinguishable over the sound of the shower. “Don’t leave me,” he begged.

I didn’t understand. I wasn’t going anywhere. Hadn’t I made that clear? I was going to protect Frank. I took another nervous glance around the room but there was no sign of *them*. Yet.

“Don’t you get it?” he cried. “Every time you act like this Markman keeps you away from me. Why did you open your mouth? All you did was give Markman a reason to keep you away from me. I won’t let her take you away. I need you, Gerard.”

I didn’t know what Frank was talking about. Every time I acted like what? What did he mean? I took a step away from the frigid water and looked around the room again. A terrified cry left my lips as I saw dark shadows flitter across the window on the far wall. I scrambled to grab a hold of Frank again but all I managed to do was pull the glove off his left hand. I threw the soaked glove on the ground frantically and turned to Frank.

“They’re here,” I told him, beseechingly extending my hand for his.

Frank surprised me by stepping up to me and wrapping his arms around my chest and burying his face in my shoulder. “They’re not real, Gerard,” he said, his voice muffled.

I tried to pull him off but he was latched onto me like a leech. He jumped up and wrapped his legs around my waist. For a moment I thought my legs were going to give way at the sudden, unexpected weight. I let one hand steady and support Frank, whilst the other I used to steady myself against the wall. I’d never been so close to Frank before but I didn’t have a chance to enjoy it. My heart thudded

painfully in my chest as I slowly raised my head to look at the window again.

As I saw the fingers curl over the sill of the open window I felt the choking, debilitating symptoms of my terror kick in. My knees buckled under me because of Frank's extra weight and the terror. It was the exact opposite of what I wanted them to do. I wanted to run but my body refused to co-operate and so did Frank.

My mind went blank as I stared at the fingers that curled over the window sill and now around the edge of the door. My mind has only ever gone blank once and it scared the fucking shit out of me. My brain is incredible; it never 'went blank'. Sometimes the magnitude of the thoughts that ran through it prevented me from sleeping. Where did everything go?

I realised that I had collapsed into one of the larger puddles of water directly underneath the vicious freezing spray of the shower. Frank only clutched harder at me and tightened his grip until it hurt. I used my free hand to shuffle myself backwards as *They* started pouring into the room through the window and the door. They slithered in through the window like snakes and traipsed in through the door like a procession. My legs slipped uselessly on the wet tiles as I slowly pulled myself back towards the wall. Frank was a dead weight that I couldn't support. I could feel his nose and lips pressed into the crook of my neck and he was shivering uncontrollably from cold. If he didn't die today from *them* I was sure he would get pneumonia. Either way, it would be my fault.

I began to hyperventilate. The air wasn't getting into my lungs and Frank was clutching me so impossibly close and tight I couldn't inhale properly. *They* crowded around me, filling my vision with their terrifying figures. I let out a choked sob. I wasn't getting enough air to cry properly so all I could do was let out strangled sobs as tears flooded down my cheeks. I'm glad Frank's face was buried in my neck and that he couldn't see *them* and so he couldn't see me cry.

Their leader stepped forward from the masses and extracted a gun from his belt. He lazily flipped the safety off and cocked it. Then he lowered it and aimed it at the back of Frank's head. It was less than a foot away from his head and I knew it would splatter Frank all over the wall…and me.

With a cry that sounded like a dying animal I shifted my body and put myself between Frank and the gun. I cringed as I felt the gun press up

against my skull. *They* were going to splatter my brains against the wall and pick my secrets off the tiles themselves. I clenched my eyes shut and waited for the end.

"Gerard, let him go."

"Gerard. You're hurting him. Let go. Please. I need help in here!"

"What did you do? Let go of your brother. He's bleeding."

"Frank, let go."

"Good lord, Gerard! What have you done? Let him go. My God, someone call 911!"

"Gerard, it's okay. You're safe now. No one is going to hurt you. Please sit up. Frank needs help.

"Gerard, let go. He's hurt. We need an ambulance. Oh my lord, they've all been shot."

My panic began to subside for some unknown reason. I was slowly regaining my ability to think. A male voice kept echoing in my head, but I didn't recognise it. I felt hands clutching at my shoulders, trying to pull me upright. The hands succeeded in their quest and the next minute my vision was swirling as I rested against the wall again. The shower had stopped spraying but the floor was still wet with puddles. The hands were now trying to pry Frank off me but neither of us would let go.

The owners of the hands kept speaking to me: "Let go. Gerard, *let go*." The voices were pleading with me.

I couldn't let go. *They* were going to hurt him. *They* were going to shoot him. I was supposed to protect him.

"Gerard. You need to let him go. Please, trust me." Markman crouched beside me, her hand resting gently on my shoulder. I looked to her for a second before glancing around the rest of the room. The only people I could see were the regular staff. *They* weren't anywhere to be seen. This had to be a trick. My eyes darted around anxiously only to return to Markman.

"They're gone," she told me.

I believed her. I trusted her. So, against all my better judgement, I let

go of Frank. But even though I'd let him go they still couldn't pull him off me. He was holding onto me with some kind of death grip. As they injected him with a powerful tranquilliser of a sedative he murmured my name. He went limp in my arms almost immediately and I wasn't surprised. There were enough drugs in that needle to put an elephant to sleep. My head was thumping and I didn't fight as someone lifted Frank from my arms.

I was freezing cold and all these people in the room were suffocating me.

"You need to get changed. You're going to get sick. It's freezing." Markman pulled me to my feet and supported me all the way to the infirmary. She left the room briefly as the male nurse stripped my clothes off and help dress me in a new set of dry clothes. I was still shivering uncontrollably, despite the many blankets I had wrapped around me when she came back.

I sat on the edge of the bed watching the shadows on the curtain that separated Frank from me. "He's going to be fine," Markman told me.

"I was trying to save him," I told her mournfully.

"I know."

"*They* were there. Then *they* disappeared. I swear *they* were there. I'm not lying."

"I know."

"I don't understand."

"Tomorrow," she said and pressed two blue pills and a cup of water into my hand. I didn't want to take the pills but she was very convincing. I swallowed them in one gulp and could feel them dissolving in my stomach already. "Tomorrow, I'll explain everything." I lay back down on the bed and Markman stayed with me until it all faded to black.

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I don't know how long the pills made me sleep for but it was still black in the infirmary when I woke up. I guessed it was four-thirty in

the morning. I lay in the darkness for a while, letting my head clear and running a quick inventory of my secrets. They were all there. I couldn't believe it. I wasn't cold anymore either.

I threw the blankets off and made my way over to the curtain that was drawn around Frank's bed. I slipped around it and stood in the shadows for a moment, checking to make sure Frank wasn't awake. He wasn't. He was still lying motionless under the mountain of blankets. Whatever drugs they had loaded him up with were obviously still pumping through his veins. I glanced around the room again before crawling up on the bed next to Frank. I lay next to him, watching his chest rise and fall. Once I was satisfied that he was alive I moved to watching his face. He looked so peaceful when he slept.

As I watched him I felt my heart begin to ache again. Then, although I knew I shouldn't have, I leant forward over Frank and brushed the hair off his face. Then I pressed my lips to his temple and kissed him. He didn't stir or snuggle into me like they did in the movies but I think preferred it this way. I knew it wasn't fair to Frank to touch him, but I couldn't stop myself. I was a bad person. A very bad person.

I lay with Frank until I fell asleep. It wasn't my intention to fall asleep but I felt safe next to Frank. I slept well when I felt safe.

"Gerard?" Frank's whispers woke me back up. "Aren't you cold?"

I was lying on top of Frank's blankets and was shivering again. "Yeah."

"Come under the blankets," Frank ordered and lifted them up.

I crawled under the blankets and Frank shifted closer to me. It was incredibly comforting.

"Gerard? Oh, Gerard?" Frank said in a hushed voice and suddenly sat up. I turned my head to look at him and he reached out with his bare fingers to touch my wet cheeks gently. Then, without any more words he lay back down and wrapped his arms around me. He didn't seem to mind that our bare skin was touching.

"I killed him," I whispered to Frank. I dropped my voice to less than a whisper, scared that someone would hear my terrible confession. "Frank. I shot him. I shot my brother."

I was a very bad person.

You're As Sick As Your Secrets

"I'm sorry," Frank mumbled, his eyes glued to the floor. He couldn't bear to look at me. I couldn't bear to look at him either.

I ignored his apology and pursed my lips, reaching out to touch the sodden remains of my beloved sketchbook.

"I'm so sorry," he repeated.

I sighed and delicately lifted the corner of one of the pages that was plastered to the one underneath it. Despite my delicate approach, the corner of the page ripped and I was left with a stamp sized piece of wet paper stuck to my fingers. That was when I gave up. There was going to be no salvage attempt. It was completely ruined. All my work was gone.

"Sorry."

Frank wrapped his arms around himself, trying to find comfort in the fact that I was angry at him.

And I was angry at him. Did he deserve it? No. Of course he didn't. But I certainly wasn't thinking logically at the moment. There was *months* of irretrievable work lying between those saturated pages. All my artwork was ruined and all my theories had been washed away. All the hours I spent late at night recording how memories work and how the mind reacts to instances of severe boredom had been wasted. My written conversations with Frank and Markman had been erased.

I was shattered. I had been so intent on saving Frank that fateful Christmas afternoon that I hadn't even thought about the well-being of my sketchbook when I plunged under that shower with Frank. With unreasonable anger I picked up the waterlogged mess and threw it with excessive force into the metal wastepaper basket next to my bed. The weight of the book sent the basket clattering loudly across the floor of my room.

Frank recoiled dramatically away from me. "I'm sorry," he exclaimed.

"Stop saying that!" I snapped, refusing to turn to look at him.

Frank inhaled sharply as I snapped at him. I felt bad. I'd never raised

my voice to him before, I don't think. He didn't deserve to be the receiver of my anger. It wasn't his fault. He didn't make me stand under that shower with him. He didn't make me open my mouth and attract *Them*. He didn't make me do anything.

Then why was I so eager to blame him?

"Yeah, well, you're not exactly a saint either, Gerard," Frank said, hurt. Before I could respond, he'd whirled around and stalked from my room.

Frank's words stabbed me in the heart like a knife and my breath caught sharply in my throat. The dread and shame and guilt sat in my stomach like a lead weight, weighing me down and poisoning me. That was the first time Frank had mentioned the horrendous act I'd committed since I'd confessed it to him in the quiet darkness of the infirmary. He must have thought I was a monster. I knew it. I doubled over, resting my head in my hands and tried to suppress the queasy feeling I felt in my stomach.

I was a *murderer*.

Every time I thought about that I felt like I was collapsing inside. It was like I was being battered down like a sandcastle caught in the rising tide. I remained hunched over, hiding my face in my hands, replaying the fateful words over and over in my head.

Gerard, let go. He's hurt. We need an ambulance. Oh my lord, they've all been shot.

The words repeated like a broken record.

Gerard, let go. He's hurt. We need an ambulance. Oh my lord, they've all been shot.

Gerard, let go. He's hurt. We need an ambulance. Oh my lord, they've all been shot.

Gerard, let go. He's hurt. We need an ambulance. Oh my lord, they've all been shot.

Gerard, let go. He's hurt. We need an ambulance. Oh my lord, they've all been shot.

Gerard, let go. He's hurt. We need an ambulance. Oh my lord, they've all been shot.

OH MY LORD, THEY'VE ALL BEEN SHOT.

"Gerard?"

I hunched my shoulders protectively, shielding myself and my tear-stained face from Ben.

"Come to lunch."

I shook my head. I wasn't hungry. I didn't think I'd ever be able to eat a meal again. Not with all the guilt weighing me down and poisoning me.

"I'm not asking." he said sternly.

"I'm not hungry," I muttered.

"Well, at least come and sit out where I can see you," Ben ordered and tried to wrench me off the bed.

I flinched away from him. "Fine," I growled. "I'll be right out."

Ben let go of my arm. "Two minutes," he warned and walked out.

I used the two exact minutes to wash my face. I didn't want anyone to see I had been crying. Crying was a sign of weakness. I had already shown my weakness to Frank once before and I didn't want to do it again. Especially not while we were fighting. I was a cold-hearted murderer and I was pretty sure that cold-hearted murderers didn't cry.

As I walked into the cafeteria I noticed Frank straightaway. I swear my body has a homing beacon for that boy installed into it. He wasn't sitting at our table. He was sitting with Ray and Bob, facing away from the direction of my table. I sat down and stared at the way he sat with his shoulders hunched and the way he wrapped his arms securely over his chest. It made my heart ache to see him sitting away from me. I wrapped my own arms over my stomach in the futile hope it would settle my nausea and give me a little bit of comfort.

I sat with my arms wrapped around myself and my chin tucked into my chest for a long time. I forced myself to count in my head to prevent myself from thinking of what I'd done. I'd gotten all the way up to 603 when a shadow fell over the table, distracting me. The man who made the shadow sat down across from me and I could feel his eyes on me. I ignored him. I didn't know who he was and I didn't care.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten. Eleven. Twelve. Thirteen. Fourteen. Fifteen….

“Maybe you should try eating something,” the stranger said and slid a tray with food on it over to me.

Fuck you. I untangled my arms and pushed the tray away, the smell making me even sicker than I already was. I glanced up to see who this annoying fuckwit actually was. I noted that he was most likely in his early thirties with styled and dyed black hair that I suspected was being held in place with ridiculous amounts of hairspray. He was wearing a white coat which confirmed my suspicions that he was doctor. But he wasn’t any doctor I’d seen before. His arms were folded on the table over a cream-coloured folder.

The moment when I noticed this particular detail was when I became intensely interested in this stranger.

His arms were resting on my file.

“You haven’t eaten anything since last night,” he pointed out and pushed the tray back to me with more force than necessary.

To hear him say that gave me the creeps. He’d obviously been watching me all day. That’s the only way he would know I hadn’t eaten since I’d forced three spoonfuls of soup down my throat last night at Frank’s insistence.

I shot him the filthiest look I could muster and his pointed chin rose sharply and self-consciously in response to my disgust. It made me feel good to know I’d gotten to him. Not like Markman. I could throw looks at Markman all I liked and I rarely ever got a reaction as good as this from her.

He leant forward and extended his hand out to me. “I’m Doctor Leto,” he informed me.

Ahh, he was a doctor. I knew it. But why was he here? Where was Markman? She was supposed to tell me the answers. I ignored Dr. Leto’s extended hand and realised that I hadn’t seen Markman in three whole days. I’d been so intent on wallowing in my guilt that I hadn’t noticed her absence.

“Where’s Doctor Markman?” I verbalised my thoughts to Dr. Leto.

Embarrassed, he withdrew his hand and said, “She’s having a family

emergency and is taking some time off."

LIES!

Someone had gotten to her. Someone knew that she was going to tell me everything. She was going to explain to me what was going on. She had promised. Someone didn't want me to know something. Was she dead? Had *they* killed her? Was I next? Was Frank next? Was Frank safe?

I looked over Dr. Leto's shoulder at Frank, checking to make sure he was alright. I swallowed another wave of nausea as I stared at Frank. I was at a loss. What could I do? There was nobody left to help me. Was this all part of *their* plan to get me? Oh God.

Dr. Leto turned around to see who I was looking at. "Is that your friend?" he asked. "What's his name?"

I didn't answer; my brain had more important things to think about. I needed to get out of here. Could I convince Frank to come with me? Dr. Leto opened my file and began flicking through the pages searching for something. I could hear the rustling of the pages and I glanced down, wondering if I could see what was in my file. I speculated for a brief moment over whether or not I would get to find out what it was that was so terrible in there that Markman wouldn't let me see. Would today be the day when I finally found out? I shot another nervous glance at Frank's back. Should I go and talk to him?

"Frank," Dr. Leto stated. "Your friend's name is Frank. How come he's sitting over there? Did you have a fight?"

My attention was diverted from Frank and back to the irritating doctor. I sighed, aggravated, and glared at him. Why couldn't he just leave me alone? Then, my eyes dropped down to the table to rest on my open file.

Now if I'd known what I was about to see when I looked down, I would never have done it. I swear I wouldn't have. It took me a second to realise what I was that I was looking at. It was a partly obscured twelve by eight inch photograph. It then took me another two point five seconds to realise what the photo was *of*.

As soon as those two point five seconds passed I freaked out. In intense horror I propelled myself backwards off the bench away from the photo and collapsed onto the floor. I scrambled blindly to my feet, my head filled with incoherent voices and screams. I barely made it

out of the cafeteria and around the corner before I was on my knees, throwing up violently. Because I hadn't eaten anything all day all I was throwing up was water and bile. Every time the image on the photograph flashed through my head, fresh waves of nausea engulfed me until all I could do was dry-retch pathetically. I collapsed onto my back, clutching at my throat and my chest, struggling to breathe. It felt like someone had clamped a thick cloth over my nose and mouth, smothering me. My throat was constricting painfully like I was being physically choked, yet no one was touching me.

The image on the photograph had burnt itself into my brain and onto my eyelids. Even when I closed my eyes all I could see was the angry red of the pooling blood around the motionless body and the chilling way the fingers were curled in slightly towards the palm. I forced my eyes open, too afraid to stay in the dark. My heart was racing dangerously fast and my whole body felt numb. I felt like I was dying. The image of the dead body on that photograph was all I could see and all I could think about. The fact that I could barely breathe and that I had virtually no feeling in my extremities took a back seat to the fact that Dr. Leto had shown me a picture of one of the innocent people I'd killed.

How many *more* people had I killed? Why couldn't I *remember?!*

I allowed my body and my precious mind to shut down in a desperate bid to cope. All the voices and figures were swarming around me like incorporeal beings. They were yelling and calling my name trying to get me to respond to them but I couldn't. I wanted to tell them to help me but I'd slipped into a state where I couldn't function.

I caught snippets of sentences but the two or three words didn't make any sense on their own. It was like trying to complete a puzzle with only half the pieces.

"Gerard."

"Fifty milligrams."

"Shock."

"Diazepam."

"Non-responsive."

"Dilated pupils."

“Call an ambulance.”

“Call Princeton Presbyterian.”

“VERY IMPORTANT PERSON!”

There had been so much blood on the ground. It was like someone had turned a tap on but then forgotten to turn it off. Blood spurted from the bodies not unlike the way water was projected from a fountain. Blood mixed with saliva dribbling out of the corner of agape mouths onto the slimy floorboards. Blood spraying onto the white walls like red spray paint. There had been so much blood. It had been all over me; all over my clothes. In my hair and in my mouth; trickling down my neck and dripping from my chin.

Was God smiting me down? Was He finally catching up with me? Is that why I felt myself slipping out of my body? Or was it *them*? Had *they* caught up with me at last? Had *they* cut into my brain? Was this what dying felt like? Had *they* finally gotten my secrets?

“Gerard? Can you hear me?!”

My vision was filled with bright light for a brief second, and then it vanished. Another second later the light was back but again it disappeared. I was so confused. My thoughts were coming back suddenly in a jumbled mess.

“If you can hear me, Gerard, squeeze my hand.”

I couldn’t even feel my own hands, let alone someone else’s.

“If you can hear me, Gerard, I need you to squeeze my hand.”

I can’t fucking do it! Haven’t you gathered that yet? If I could squeeze your fucking hand I would have done it the first time!

“He’s non-responsive.”

My heart was pounding in my chest and I could feel cold air being blown over my mouth. I assumed I was wearing an oxygen mask. That knowledge pleased me. At least I wasn’t going to suffocate anytime soon.

“No he’s not, you pretentious idiot. He’s in shock. Get away from my patient.” Holy fucking hell, I don’t think I’ve ever been so happy to

hear that woman's voice. Looks like she wasn't dead after all. "What did you give him?"

The meek voice of Dr. Leto said, "Diazepam."

"You gave him *Valium?!* How *much* Valium?" I could hear the fury in Markman's voice. Sweet.

Dr. Leto's first answer was incomprehensible. All he did was mumble. Markman insulted him again and in his defence he said, "He was having a serious panic attack. He needed to be sedated."

I heard the clip-clop of Markman's high heels on the floor as she walked around to the other side of my bed. I could only imagine what her face looked like at the moment. "How much?" she asked again.

"Fifty milligrams."

That amount had no relevance to me but it obviously did to Markman because she went off her nut. "FIFTY MILLIGRAMS!" she screamed. "He could've gone into cardiac arrest!"

"But he didn't!"

"But he could have! What were you thinking? Did you want to be the one to tell his parents?"

There was silence on Dr. Leto's part after that. "It was an accident," he said eventually.

"What was? You almost *killing* the poor kid?!"

"He's hardly a child, Jillian," Dr. Leto spat. "You know what he's done. You saw it yourself."

I felt like I was listening to a soap opera. A soap opera where I was the main character who everyone would frequently talk about, when he wasn't around. It was pretty intense. Markman didn't reply to Dr. Leto's statement and I imagined her staring at the wall, grinding her teeth angrily.

"I didn't mean to show him the photo," Dr. Leto said begrudgingly.

Markman laughed scathingly. "I'm sure you didn't."

"I didn't!" Dr. Leto insisted.

Fuck, I wish I could see what's going on. Only being able to hear was driving me crazy. Was a fist fight on the cards? I did feel quite honoured about how Markman was sticking up for me. She seemed to be reluctant to let Dr. Leto call me a cold-hearted murderer, even though that was so obviously what I was.

Dr. Leto shuffled some papers as he spoke, "You know what this means now, right?"

"Enlighten me?"

"The way he reacted…pretty indicative of his guilt, don't you think?"

I swear Markman just imploded, but she kept her voice measured. "It means nothing."

"They'll make him stand trial."

"Gerard Way is no longer fit to stand trial for any crime; you made sure of that yourself, Doctor."

Dr. Leto swore.

I kept my eyes shut as he stormed from the room and pretended to be asleep but I should've known better than to try to fool Markman.

"I leave you alone for three days and you freak out on me, Gerard?"

Holy shit, did she know I'd heard everything? Did she know I was awake? Is there anything that woman doesn't know? I swear there are things she knows about me that even I don't know about me. Well, for instance, she knew what I had done, even when I didn't. Did she know about me and Frank? Would she separate us if she knew? Would she accuse me of taking advantage of him? Did she know that I liked Frank? That I liked him much more than a friend? Did she know that I was *in like* with him? That I was teetering on the edge of falling *in love* with him?

Did Frank know that? Did Frank know that I liked him so much it hurt me physically to be angry with him or for him to be angry with me? Would I get a chance to tell him? Or would I stand trial like Dr. Leto predicted and be sent straight to Greenwood? Would I spend the rest of my life in a mental asylum for the criminally insane being treated like a monster for what I'd done?

"Heart rate and BP's going up." An unfamiliar female voice reached

my ears. A nurse?

A moment later my frantic train of thought was abruptly cut off as the owner of the female voice sent me into darkness.

***

Coming out of sedation is one of the most annoying things in the world. I'd been sedated quite a few times in the past few months and I hated it. I hated the way my head was all cloudy and full of nonsense. I hated how bright the lights seemed to be to my eyes. I hated how lethargic I felt for hours afterwards. I hated that I would go to sleep in one place but wake up in another.

I was surprised to find that I was still in the hospital. Princeton Presbyterian to be exact. I'd been here before. I was in the exact same room that I'd been in that time when *they* sliced my head open and that arse of a plastic surgeon was brought in to fix it. I was surprised because I'd half-expected to be waking up to find myself in a cell, awaiting my judgement day.

I glanced across and was quite stunned to see Markman sitting by the wall. She was dozing with her head resting on the palm of her hand in one of those uncomfortable plastic hospital chairs. Had she been there all along? I felt rather touched. Maybe she wasn't the devil in disguise after all.

I coughed pointedly to see if she was awake and it seemed she was, because she opened her eyes immediately.

"Oh, Gerard." She seemed to be overcome with emotion for a moment. That surprised me even more. I could've sworn she hated me. She swept her brown hair back into a messy bun as she made her way over to my bedside.

I stared up at her, waiting for her to say something first.

She brandished her finger at me. "Never do that to me again!" she exclaimed.

I smiled meekly at her and she rolled her eyes. I was glad that things were going to be normal between us. But would things stay normal?

"I'm sorry," I murmured. I wasn't apologising for scaring her and she knew that because she shook her head at me. "I don't want to go."

“You really think I’m going to let you go that easy? I need someone to keep me on my toes for a long time to come yet, Gerard. But, now do you understand why I wouldn’t let you see your file? There is method to my madness, you know.”

She had been protecting me all along. I’d given her such a hard time about it too. What a fucking joke. Markman reached into a bag under my bed and pulled out a pair of my jeans and a hoodie.

“Why don’t you get changed and I’ll take you home?”

I nodded, unable to believe it. Didn’t she remember what I had done? Why was she acting like I wasn’t a cold-hearted murderer? Just as Markman got to the door she turned and looked at me. “You’d tell me if you remember anything about that day, wouldn’t you?”

With wide eyes I nodded automatically. I was still surprised they were allowing me to go back home to really understand what she was saying.

The after effects of the sedation meant I slept the entire way back to Bluestone and then for the rest of the afternoon in the infirmary. Man, I’d spent a lot of time in this place lately. As I lay in the darkness I thought about when all this had started. It all coincided with the arrival of Frank. *Their* attempts to steal my secrets, the dreams about Michael, the foreign memories that I didn’t remember making, all started when I opened myself up to Frank.

It was all his fault.

But I didn’t care.

I wouldn’t have it any other way.

Fuck, I’m turning into a fucking sissy.

It wasn’t until an hour after they called bedtime that Frank came sneaking in to see me. I was expecting him to be all timid and meek after the fight we’d had before I’d had my panic attack. But he surprised me again. Fuck, I was getting sick of surprises.

“We have our first fight and you have a breakdown on me,” he joked, smoothing my bed sheets. I noticed that he had his skeleton gloves back on.

I think that this was his version of a peace offering. Whatever it was I knew it meant he had forgiven me.

“Any room up there for me?” he asked.

In response I shuffled over and straightaway he climbed up next to me and lay down. I breathed him in, not realised how much I’d missed him until I had him back. I rolled over onto my side to stare at him and he mimicked me so we were facing each other. He propped himself up slightly on his elbow and smiled.

I knew this wasn’t a good idea. I was afraid. I was scared of how I might hurt Frank. I’d killed those people. I’d killed my brother. I didn’t know what triggered me to do it, and I didn’t want to find out.

“Oh, hey, Gerard? I found this,” Frank said and pulled a piece of paper from his pocket. It was all creased like it had been scrunched into a ball but then smoothed out. “It was scrunched up in your wastepaper basket. I was cleaning up your room,” he added.

I didn’t know what the paper was but I knew it wasn’t anything of great importance. It was most likely a sketch I’d messed up or a theory I’d gotten wrong. Frank offered me the paper and I read it in the faint glow of one of the monitors. It was my theory on how memories work. I’d been mulling over this the very first time I saw Frank in the TV room.

“Is it true?” Frank asked hopefully. “Can you really lose a memory?”

“Yeah. Sort of,” I breathed and handed the paper back.

Frank inhaled sharply. “Really?” he said disbelievingly. “How? Show me how?”

“It’s not that simple. It’s easier to just replace the memory.”

Frank scanned back over the paper. “It doesn’t say anything about replacing on here,” he accused, waving the paper in my face. “Tell me how it works.”

I just wanted to lay there with Frank; I didn’t want to waste time discussing irrelevant theories for Frank’s amusement.

“Please.”

I sighed. “Well, let’s use the instance of learning to ride a bike, okay?

Let's imagine that you're riding the bike around the street and you fall off and hurt yourself. From that moment you can do one of two things. You can get back on or you can put the bike back in the garage and never ride it again. If you choose to put the bike back in the garage the only memory you're going to have of that bike is the bad memory of you falling off. Or you can get back on and stay on, and if you do that the memory you're going to favour is the good one of you getting back on and staying on. So technically you've replaced the bad memory of falling off with the good one of staying on. Does that make sense?"

It was quite difficult to try to explain these things to people who didn't have a brain like mine. Frank nodded enthusiastically, hanging onto my every word.

"Does it work for all things?" he asked.

"Pretty much," I replied. Most people unconsciously replaced memories all the time. It was something you could do without any pre-meditation. Not like the act of losing memories. That required a lot of pre-meditation. I began listing some common reasons why people replaced memories. "Lots of people do it with scary movies, animal bites, first dates…."

"First kisses?" Frank blurted out.

"Yeah... wait, what?" I said moving my eyes from the ceiling to his face.

Even in the darkness of the room I could see the pure excitement in his eyes. It was literally oozing out of his pores. What was he up to? I thought back to when I'd first saw him. I had noted that day that his lips had touched another person's, but I'd forgotten until now. It made sense now.

"Will you help me?" he asked.

"No," I responded, embarrassed and reluctant. I wasn't going to be the one to take advantage of Frank. No way. Not in a million years.

"But you said…."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

I moved away from Frank as he moved closer to me. Was I detecting desperation now?

“I want to replace that memory, Gerard. You don’t know what it’s like to have them lingering on your lips and on your body.”

“You’re using me,” I pointed out near-frantically, making up excuses.

“That’s a lie, and you know it,” he whispered. He slipped his gloves off and let one hand slide up the side of my face.

I shouldn’t do it. It was the wrong thing to do, right? I didn’t even know what to do. I’d never kissed anyone before. Frank let his hand slip off my face when I didn’t respond or react. He rolled away from me so he was on his back staring up at the ceiling.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured.

I pushed myself up onto my elbow so I was looking down at Frank. He gazed back at me, his eyes wide in anticipation. I let my right hand settle gently on the side of Frank’s face, and stroked his cheek so lightly he could’ve mistaken it for a breath of air. I let my hand slip down his face until I was cupping the back of his head, just under his ear. I dragged my thumb over the corner of his lips and he shivered.

Afraid I’d done the wrong thing, I drew back. I lost my nerve and lay back down, avoiding Frank’s eye contact.

“I trust you.”

It took a while for those words to sink in. I hated that Frank trusted me so wholeheartedly. I was so afraid I was going to hurt him.

“What’s the matter?” he asked eventually, not spitefully but worriedly.

“You know what I did,” I reminded him.

Frank made a noise in his throat that sounded like disapproval. “It was an accident,” he told me firmly.

“You don’t know that.”

“Neither do you.”

“You could be wrong.”

“So could you.”

I smiled in the darkness. If only Frank knew how unlikely it was for me to be wrong.

Frank continued, “I’m not scared of you, you know. If you were capable of hurting me, I think you would’ve done it already.”

I think that was meant to be comforting but it gave me the chills. I hadn’t hurt him, *yet*. There was no guarantee I still wouldn’t do it. “I can’t,” I said eventually.

“Okay,” Frank said dejectedly. “I think I’ll go to bed.” Without a further word he walked out.

He didn’t even look back at me.

He did, however, sit with me at breakfast the next morning acting like nothing had happened the night before. I wasn’t going to bring it up, even though I had lain awake until three o’clock in the morning, mulling over it and thinking of how it could’ve gone differently. As we ate, Frank told me everything that had happened in the forty eight hours I’d been gone. There had been one exciting occurrence. Trust something exciting to happen when I’m not there.

In addition to traumatising me, Dr. Leto had also insulted Bert which resulted in Bert trying to attack Dr. Leto with a plastic spork. Bert had been able to inflict a surprising amount of scratches on Dr. Leto’s smooth high-cheeked face and neck before the orderlies managed to pull him off. I made a mental note to commend Bert as soon as he got let out of solitary. I may even reconsider his ban on sitting at my table.

Ray and Adam came over to welcome me back. I didn’t know why they both persisted in being nice to me; maybe it was a symptom of their craziness?

“That lady won’t stop looking at you,” Frank said suddenly, pointing out a strange pale woman who was standing at the visitor entrance. We all turned to look at her and I stared back at her for a while, trying to unnerve her but she held my gaze with ease. She seemed quite familiar, actually.

“I know who she is,” Adam said darkly.

“Who?” Frank, Ray and I all asked eagerly in unison.

“She’s from the Government. She’s one of the people trying to cover up my abduction.”

Frank and I both sat back, disappointed. “Oh, right,” I said. Ray seemed enthralled by the story though.

Adam lowered his voice so we all had to lean back in to hear him. “I’ve never told anyone this but I have a tracking chip in the back of my neck,” he disclosed. He glanced around nervously before continuing. “The aliens put it there so they can find me again. The Government has a top secret taskforce that deals with the paranormal and she’s part of it. They’ve been watching me for months.”

“Wow.” Ray’s eyes were wide in astonishment. He seemed to be the only one who believed Adam. Frank and I certainly didn’t. For starters, there is no such thing as aliens. I know that. I know things, remember?

“They’re also the ones behind the Y2K cover-up, you know?” Adam explained.

Hearing Adam mention the Y2K reminded me that today was New Year’s Eve. I’d completely forgotten with all that had been going on since Christmas. Tomorrow was going to be a whole new year. A whole new start.

The group therapy session was unusually early this morning, straight after breakfast. I didn’t like changes to the routine. I liked my routine. I liked knowing exactly when things were going to happen. I was getting sick of surprises. Ray, Frank and Adam all walked into the room in front of me but I stopped before going in. I was getting a bad feeling about this already. Especially since Adam had pinned that pale-faced lady as a Government agent. The strange thing was that I believed him. He was right and he didn’t even know it.

I saw Markman walking towards the room so I intercepted her. “I need to talk to you,” I told her urgently.

“Not now.” She brushed me off and tried to keep walking.

“It’s important.”

“Not now,” she replied but couldn’t go anywhere because I had planted myself in front of her.

I sighed, aggravated. “She’s come to take me away, hasn’t she? She knows I killed those people.”

Markman paled and grabbed my arm, dragging me around the corner. “Be quiet,” she hissed. Yes, she hissed like she was afraid someone was listening. She was becoming as fearful and as paranoid as me.

“You told me I wouldn’t have to go,” I stammered. “I didn’t mean to hurt him. I really didn’t. I was trying to save him. Please don’t let them take me away.” I was on the verge of begging.

“Be quiet, be quiet!” she said, dragging me further and further away from the room. “I can’t talk about this now, Gerard.”

“Why not?!”

“*SHHHHHH!* ” she half-screamed, half-whispered.

“Please don’t let them take me away,” I begged, grabbing her arm. I wouldn’t go. They couldn’t make me go.

Markman was shaking. “We can’t talk about this now, Gerard.”

“What’s Gerard not allowed to talk about?” A male voice interrupted our hushed argument. We both went deathly silent and stared at the three people who had accosted us in the hallway. Both Markman and I let go of where we had been clutching each other and I swallowed painfully. My brain whirred as it struggled to think up an excuse. The older, greying man was accompanied by the pale-faced woman from before and another middle-aged man. They were all dressed like they were going to court, in perfectly pressed suits and immaculate hair. Maybe they were going to take me straight in to stand trial for murdering all those people.

“What can’t you talk about, Gerard?” Older Man asked me again.

A moment later I had a brain wave. This is why I love my brain. I folded my arms over my chest crossly and pretended to be annoyed. I didn’t dare to look at Markman.

“*Well,*” I sighed. “I wanted to stay up tonight and watch the New Year’s fireworks on the television but I’m not *allowed*. And she won’t even give me a proper reason. I mean, it’s only midnight. I’ve stayed up until midnight before. It’s stupid. And I keep asking why not but she keeps telling me to stop talking about it and live with her decision.”

I knew instantly that they all bought my lie. I was very good at reading people, especially those who were useless at hiding their reactions.

“Were you off to anywhere important?” The older man asked me.

“Ummm….no. Yes,” I changed my mind hastily. “Group session. *Very important.”*

“I’m sure Dr. Markman can excuse you for one session.”

Markman didn’t argue. She didn’t even look at me as she walked briskly away.

My stomach dropped through the floor as the older man took a hold of my arm and led me away in the opposite direction from the therapy room. He led me into the cafeteria which was now empty. We sat down at a table in the middle. I didn’t like sitting here. It wasn’t my usual table. I only like to sit at my usual table. The two men sat on one side while the woman sat next to me. I glanced around and was worried to see half a dozen more men in dark suits standing against the walls looking very serious.

“Now, Gerard, do you know why we are here?” The older man asked.

“You don’t have to answer that, Gerard,” the woman interjected immediately and scowled at the man.

Why wasn’t I allowed to answer that? I was baffled. I looked to the woman, blinking blankly at her. “Who are you?” I asked softly.

She looked like she had been slapped in the face. “I’m your lawyer, Gerard,” she replied indignantly.

“Oh.” I had a lawyer? Jeez, so she was here to save me.

“Gerard, you don’t remember me?”

“No. Sorry,” I added, a little uncomfortable.

“Sure you do. I’m Lindsey, remember?” She was getting a little bit restless and anxious now and she kept glancing at the two men.

I swallowed and shook my head.

“Your dad hired me….?” She exchanged a glance with the middle-aged man.

I shook my head again.

The middle aged man sat forward now. “Gerard, do you know who I am?” he asked.

I frowned before I could help it. “Umm, no. Sorry.” I had come into this meeting with the intention of playing dumb but it seemed that I didn’t need to pretend.

“This is pointless,” the older man interjected angrily and I recoiled back from the table.

The middle-aged man became rather upset that I hadn’t recognised him. He got rather emotional and I felt quite embarrassed. “Have we met?” I asked hesitantly. “Because maybe if you tell me where we met I might have more luck remembering you. You see, sometimes my brain gets a bit overloaded. It’s been really busy lately...?”

He didn’t answer my question. He just stared at me with a real poignant look. I bit my lip. “You do look a little bit familiar,” I offered, trying to cheer him up. Gosh, it wasn’t the end of the world that I didn’t remember him. I wasn’t anyone important. I cocked my head to the side, racking my brains. “Were you on TV? Are you an actor, or something?”

Lindsey set her hand on my arm, preventing from saying any more. As I shut up the older man said, “I think we’re done here.”

He stood up and everyone followed his example. I glanced uneasily around at all the men who lined the room. “Are they Spooks?” I whispered to Lindsey.

“What?!” she exclaimed. I was getting the feeling that she didn’t like me. She was obviously a very high-paid, high-class lawyer who didn’t have time for people like me.

“Spooks. Like CIA?”

“No,” she said disapprovingly.

I didn’t let it go. I ran through all the different organisations in my head. FBI? CIA? Secret Service? MI6? Fuck, I had no idea. As suddenly as they arrived, the two men and the woman, Lindsey, left. They left me with a million questions racing through my head.

What a bizarre half an hour. I had a lot to tell Frank.

Unfortunately I didn't have chance to be alone with Frank for the rest of the day. It wasn't until after they called lights out and Frank snuck into my room that I was able to tell him my news.

"Spooks?" Frank said in awe. "Are you sure? That's pretty cool." He laughed and shook his head.

I shrugged. "I thought they had come to arrest me," I confessed.

"Why would they do that? It was an accident, remember?"

"You don't accidentally shoot several people, Frank," I said, raising an eyebrow at him.

Frank didn't continue the argument. Instead he stood up on my bed, glancing at his watch. Using my pillows to give him extra height he rested his chin on the window sill and gazed out the window.

I stood next to him and stared out into the night. Less than a minute later Frank made an "ohhh," sound as he spotted the first of the fireworks in the distance. We were so far away that to us they looked like tiny sparks. But Frank didn't seem to care. He just watched the show with a little smile on his face.

It didn't last as long as I hoped it would. It made me really wish that we were allowed to stay up to watch the amazing display that was broadcast on the television. Less than five minutes after it started, Frank and I were lying back on bed next to each other again. We lay in comfortable silence for a long time and I even began to fall asleep.

"I didn't mean to put you in such an awkward position last night," Frank said suddenly. "Thank you for not taking advantage of me. I honestly thought it would work. I'm sorry for being stupid." He went silent before whispering to himself as an afterthought, "So stupid."

"I don't think you're stupid," I told him and rolled over onto my side to look at him. He did the same and it was like we were back in the infirmary again. Except this time there were no silly expectations or pressure.

I leant in ever so slightly and Frank repeated what he'd told me last night. "I trust you."

I half-sat up so I could lean over Frank better. He was definitely more relaxed than he was last night and I was too. Even though I still had no idea what I was doing I was calm. I cupped my hand under his ear

again and Frank reached up to run his fingers down my jaw bone lightly. As I got lower and lower the butterflies in my stomach became more active until they were almost unbearable. When my lips were about three inches above Frank's I hesitated again. Frank took a deep breath and shut his eyes, tilting his chin up. Not wanting to disappoint him I covered the last three inches until my lips were pressed up against Frank's.

He had the softest lips I could imagine. Even softer than those models in the commercials with the plush botoxed lips. My head seemed to implode as the sensors in my lips registered what they were doing. My thoughts seemed to slow down to nothing except for a mantra of 'FRANK'. I lifted off for a split-second before pressing my lips down a little harder onto Frank's and opening my mouth.

I lurched over that mental edge that I had been teetering on for several weeks and plunged into the unknown abyss below. But it's okay, Frank was my parachute. I don't know why I was worried. This was a piece of cake and I think I am actually quite good at it.

Frank opened his own mouth and pushed his wet lips up against mine, his nose digging into my cheek. Our lips, lubricated with each other's saliva, slid over each other as the kiss progressed from being innocent to verging on being rather intense and passionate. I was thinking that maybe I should stop. I didn't think it was ideal for this to go past innocent just yet. I felt Frank pull away before he even knew he was doing it. Worried again that I had done something wrong I lifted my lips off Frank's and sat back. Frank's eyes remained shut and he was breathing quite heavily, his cheeks flushed. Then, an adorable coy smile spread across his moist lips and he raised his fingers to touch them, a real sense of wonder attached to his actions.

Frank opened his eyes and gave me such a pure smile my stomach did a somersault.

"Did it work?" I enquired nervously.

"It worked."

Alive

It is amazing how interesting the pattern on the floor can become when you stare at it for an extended period of time.

It's Intern Week.

That is why I am staring at the floor.

Intern-Week actually spans over two weeks, but Intern-Fortnight sounds stupid so I refer to this dreadful period of time as Intern-Week. Or, actually, I could just call it Hell-Week. I deem both terms appropriate.

Anyway, I'm staring at the floor because the interns are running a workshop. Its actually going quite successfully, considering everyone is participating. Except me, of course. I am staring at the floor.

I have picked my intern already. Every intern gets assigned a patient they have to analyse over the course of their placement. Every year I pity the poor fool who thinks they are going to be my best friend by the end of the two weeks. The first year the poor girl gave up after three days of me point-blank ignoring her and didn't return for the rest of the placement. Last year the insolent boy stayed the entire time and tried everything from insulting me to begging with me to interact with him. He failed the assignment; I overheard Markman talking to him about it. It amused me a great deal to hear her berating him for calling me stupid.

My intern this year has spent the last hour trying to make eye-contact with me but I have only been making eye contact with the floor, so he's not getting very far. It took him a while to figure out who I was because I refused to wear the name tag. Everyone else was wearing those idiotic speed-dating nametags that boldly stated: 'Hi! My name is….' There was no way I was allowing that sticker to come anywhere near me. There were three reasons behind my reluctance to wear the name tag. Firstly, they look ridiculous. There was only one exception to this rule and that was Frank. He looked ridiculously cute instead. When Markman gave him the sticker he obediently stuck it to his shirt straightaway. He hadn't worked himself up to defying Markman as openly as I did. I, on the other hand, scrunched it up immediately and tossed it under Ray's chair as soon as I got it. Markman didn't react in

the slightest and simply moved on to the next person.

The second reason I refused to wear the name tag was for entertainment purposes. I thought it would be much more interesting and amusing for the interns to have to figure out who we were themselves. The third reason was along the lines of self-preservation. I am being hunted. *They* are searching for me. I wasn't going to wear a nametag that told *them* who I was. I'm not a fucking idiot. Man, seriously.

An intern was moving around the circle handing out pieces of paper and pencils. When she got to me, I ignored her. She was quite thrown for a long moment. Everyone else leading up to me had accepted the paper and pencil graciously. She wasn't expecting someone to be uncooperative. She stood there dumbly, staring at me, still holding the paper out to me even though it was clear I wasn't going to accept it. I wondered whether she would just dump it in my lap and move on or whether she would just skip me. She did neither. She stammered and faltered and looked around desperately at her colleagues for advice. Finally, Frank felt sorry for her and accepted the materials on my behalf. He set them down under my chair and the girl took that as incentive to start moving again.

The aim of this first exercise was to write down ten bad things in our lives, or ten things that worried us or a combination of both. After we had written down the ten things we would go off with our intern to discuss them and create ways to overcome them.

Fuck this shit.

No one was wearing a name tag with Gerard on it, and I was the only person without a name tag. Despite this, it took my intern a shocking amount of time to figure out who I was. However, once he finally singled me out through the process of elimination, he came over to me.

I snuck a glance at Frank's list and he had three things on it. I was desperate to read what they were. I would kill to know what worried him, just so I could try to fix it. Hell, I'd even commit genocide to find out the bad things in Frank's life.

I know I really shouldn't be joking about killing. Doesn't really seem appropriate now, considering the circumstances.

"You not writing a list, Gerard?" my intern asked.

Yes, I am. Just because I don't want to write it down on paper doesn't mean I'm not thinking about it. Who needs paper when you have a brain like mine?

The intern collected my piece of paper from under my chair and held the pencil in his hand. "Why don't you tell me them, and I'll write them down? How does that sound?"

It sounds like shit. But what the hell? I'll make a list in my head, just for something to do.

Ten bad things in Gerard's (my) life:

1. I'm a murderer.
2. I shot my brother; my own flesh and blood.
3. I kissed Frank. Okay, that doesn't sound bad at the moment, but just wait.
4. I have a boyfriend I'm not allowed to touch. The kissing was a one-off thing, obviously.
5. I don't even *know* if Frank *is* my boyfriend. What classifies a boyfriend anyway?
6. I saw Lindsey again this morning. She just dropped by to collect some papers. But still, the heart attack I had when I saw her constitutes her as being in my list of bad things.
7. I'm hungry.
8. I'm due for a blood test this afternoon.
9. The cafeteria lady who makes the chicken soup with *real* chicken got another job.
10. Markman never "explained everything," and is now denying those words ever left her mouth.

Hell, I'm on a role, I'm gonna keep going.

11. I'm terrified of being sent to jail.
12. I'm terrified that if I don't go to jail I will end up at Greenwood, which is worse than a jail because the other inmates are murderers, rapists and paedophiles *as well* as being crazy and mentally unstable.
13. I'm still not sleeping properly.
14. I'm still scared I'll hurt Frank.
15. Frank trusts me unconditionally.
16. I've fallen in love with Frank. This should really be emphasised as a major bad thing in my life at the moment.
17. I'm desperate to kiss Frank *again*. That's why number three made its way into my top ten.
18. My new sketch book is too new and starchy.

19. I think the medication I'm on has made me gain five pounds. I mean, since going on the medication until now I've put on weight. I definitely feel and look bigger. Markman says it's just a side effect of the several medications I'm on and not to worry about it. Easy for her to say. It's okay though, I've stopped taking it so it doesn't matter anymore.

I could list many, many bad things in my life at the moment. Hell, this mental list could reach over a hundred if I let it. But I'm getting kinda bored now. So, I think I'll stop it at 20. And I saved the worst until last.

20. Jasper's back.

He's watching me. He's staring at me. His severe, unrelenting gaze is really starting to unnerve me. He's so angry with me. I can feel the fury oozing out of him. It's in his eyes and in his body language. His lips are pressed together tightly and his arms are crossed over the gold sash on his chest. I've been ignoring him too.

"Gerard?" my intern prompted.

When I didn't respond he stood up and for a brief second I felt triumphant. But no, all he was doing was moving so he was crouching in front of me.

"Gerard?"

Fuck.

As the man said my name again, I accidentally looked at him. He was directly in my line of vision and before I could stop myself I let my eyes flick to his and make eye-contact. I did not want to do that. It was an automatic response. Our eyes met for a split-second. No, it was even less than a split-second, but still, the damage was done. A smug smile crept onto the intern's face as he realised that he had defeated me.

Bastard.

I made a big point about looking purposefully in the other direction and turning my nose up at him like he was a piece of sheep liver. Unperturbed, he smiled at me.

"I'm Brendon."

No, you are a fuckwit. End of story.

I snuck another glance at Frank's list; he hadn't added any more to it. In fact, I was pretty sure he had scribbled the second one out. I didn't quite get to see because as soon as Frank saw I was trying to read what he had written, he flipped the page over. Disappointed, I looked away and checked to see if Jasper was still hanging around.

I jumped slightly in surprise as his large, scarred hand clamped down on my shoulder, just as I was searching the room for him. He leant down so he was whispering in my ear.

"Come with me," he asked. No, actually, he wasn't asking, he was *ordering* me to do it.

But I wasn't a recruit in his platoon. I didn't have to follow his orders. He wasn't my commanding officer. I answered to no one.

"Now!" he roared, squeezing my shoulder so hard I swear I felt my bones crack.

I shot up out of my chair faster than a bullet, my shoulder throbbing. The chair toppled over behind me but I didn't dare stop to pick it up. I scurried out of the room after Jasper, well aware of the confused silence I left in my wake. I trailed after Jasper rather reluctantly. I didn't want to follow him and find out what he wanted to speak to me about. But I was just as afraid to face his wrath if I didn't do as he asked.

Jasper's changed a lot in the past few months. He used to be friendly and nice and he was always telling me cool war stories. But ever since the arrival of Frank he's become moody, cruel and angry. I don't know what I did wrong.

Once we were in my room Jasper began his verbal assault on me. "What are you doing?!" he yelled.

My eyes widened in surprise. At that precise moment I was doing nothing. I blinked at Jasper and remained silent, keeping my sarcasm to myself.

"I *told you* to cut him loose. Are you stupid, boy? Can't you see what a threat he is?!"

Oh. Frank. That's right.

“Do I have to remind you, Gerard, how close *they* got? They *cut into your head!* The only thing separating *them* from your secrets was a few millimetres of bone! Why didn’t you listen to me?!” Jasper was angrier than I’d ever seen him before. I took a tentative step away from him, trying to be as discreet as possible in my retreat. I was so afraid he was going to hurt me.

“I’m –,” I began.

“DON’T SPEAK!” he bellowed, flecks of spit flying from his mouth. “They can track your voice! Have you listened to nothing I’ve been telling you?! I don’t like that I’ve wasted my time, Gerard. There are plenty of other people out there I could be helping!”

I inhaled sharply, embarrassed and hurt.

“I’m leaving. You’re on your own, Gerard. You won’t last a day without me, boy. You’re going to regret this for the rest of your short life until *they* succeed. You should’ve listened to me.”

“Don’t leave me!” I begged and reached out for Jasper’s arm. I owe the fact that I’m still alive after several close encounters with them to him. I know that. I acknowledge that. He can’t leave me. He can’t. He just…can’t.

As soon as I spoke Jasper growled in fury. “You have a death wish, boy,” he snarled, snatching his arm out of my grasp.

He can’t leave me. I need him. I’ll die without him. He’s always been there to warn me. Without Jasper I won’t last a week. Oh, God.

“Please, don’t leave me. I’m sorry. I’ll do whatever you want.” In my distress I didn’t realise how binding my words were.

Jasper squared his jaw and drew himself up to his full height. Despite his age, Jasper was still taller than me. His face was flushed from yelling and the veins in his neck were literally popping out. He folded his arms. “Cut Frank loose,” he told me in his non-negotiable, commanding officer tone.

A silent cry of anguish fell from my mouth. I couldn’t do that. I simply couldn’t. No.

“Goodbye, Gerard,” Jasper said, his voice monotone, and clamped his hand down on the door handle.

“Don’t make me do that. Please. Don’t leave me. I’ll do anything. Anything but that. Please. *Please*.” I knew it was useless. My throat was burning and my stomach was aching. I couldn’t do this on my own. I didn’t want to die. I didn’t want to lose Frank. I couldn’t stand the thought of either.

I forced Jasper away from the door and back into the centre of my room. I planted myself between him and the door. I wouldn’t let him leave without a fight.

“Why are you making me choose!?” I cried.

“WHY ARE YOU STILL SPEAKING?!” he hollered back at me, twice as loud.

I cringed away from Jasper’s rage, frightened.

“You can’t protect him. It’s for his and your own good. You know what happened last time you thought you could protect someone from *them*. This doesn’t need to end in the same way. You’ll be saving him by letting him go.”

“You don’t understand,” I said, beseechingly. “This is different.”

Jasper pursed his lips impatiently and stamped his foot. “You’re a pathetic fool,” he said maliciously.

My chest gave a painful spasm and my eyes burned as Jasper mocked me so openly. I didn’t have anything else to say. I was defeated. I’d never been defeated in my whole life. That time when Ray beat me at Monopoly doesn’t count either.

I wondered why Jasper wasn’t still speaking and looked up at him. At first I thought it was me he was glaring at with intense hatred, but when I spun around I realised it was Frank who was receiving his loathing. It looked like Frank had been there for a while because he was speechless. He even looked rather frightened. I don’t blame him. Jasper is one frightening man.

All Frank could do was stare at me. He swallowed and flicked his eyes from me to where Jasper was standing behind me. I still didn’t quite understand why he was so frightened though. Jasper wasn’t yelling anymore.

“What’s the matter?” I asked concerned and took a step forward. I ignored Jasper’s noise of disapproval from behind me.

To my surprise Frank took a step away from me. It was then that I realised. Frank was frightened of *me*. He was looked at me with a sickening fear radiating from him. What had I done?

“Y-you need h-help, Gerard,” Frank stammered and backed away so he was standing in the doorway.

“What?” I breathed, bewildered and hurt.

“You’re talking to no one, Gerard.”

“I’m talking to Jasper,” I replied immediately and gestured behind me to where Jasper had been standing.

“No. You’re talking to no one,” Frank said firmly. “There’s no one there.”

Why would he say that? Why would Frank lie to me so openly and so blatantly? Of course I was talking to someone. I was talking to Jasper. Jasper isn’t ‘no one.’

“Why would you say that?” I whispered, my mouth going dry.

“You’re sick, Gerard.”

“No, I’m not,” I said, my voice rising defensively.

Why was Frank saying these things? I’m not sick. I’m not crazy. I’m talking to Jasper. Jasper’s real. I don’t like this. Why would Frank hurt me like this? Was this his cruel idea of a joke? Oh, God, what is going on? I spun around to confront Jasper again but he had disappeared. How is that possible? I never saw him leave through the door. He can’t have gone.

Fuck me.

“I’m not sick,” I repeated, but I couldn’t convince myself and knew I wasn’t convincing Frank.

“You’re sick,” Frank whispered wretchedly.

“I’m not,” I mumbled and searched the room for Jasper. He can’t have just disappeared. That doesn’t happen. People don’t just disappear. “He was here. I swear. I’m not crazy. He was here. He was…. He was *right here*. I’m not crazy. Please believe me, Frank.”

“You’re scaring me,” Frank revealed and refused to look me in the

eyes. “Stop it.” He wrapped his arms around his stomach, clutching and hugging himself comfortingly, like he always did when he was sad or afraid.

I scared him? How is that possible? How can he be totally at ease around me knowing I had shot my brother, but become fearful at the prospect of my lack of sanity?

“I’m not crazy,” I muttered, crushed.

Just when I thought that Frank couldn’t say anything worse he uttered, “Why won’t you let her help you?”

My confusion and distress took a back seat at that moment to an intense anger. *Her*. I hated her. I hated her so much it hurts. She’s turned Frank against me. Now Frank thinks I’m crazy. Now Frank thinks I’m just like the rest of them. I’m not like the rest of them. I’m not crazy. Jasper’s real. I’m not sick. *They* are real. Markman has turned Frank against me. She has never believed that *they* were real. But that’s her prerogative. She can believe what she likes. But she had no right to turn Frank against me.

I clenched my jaw shut and marched past Frank towards Markman’s office. I was going to tell her exactly what I thought. I didn’t want to be here anymore. Frank thought I was crazy. He looked at me and thought about me in the same way I regarded Ray, Bob and Adam. I couldn’t stand the thought of Frank’s condemnation.

I didn’t have a plan when I reached Markman’s office but I knew I could rely on my brain to help me out. I kicked the door open savagely and stormed in. Markman and about a dozen interns all froze and snapped their heads to stare at me. I hadn’t factored on the interns being in the room but it was too late to back out now. I’d made an entrance, now I needed to follow through.

“How could you?!” I exclaimed at Markman, my hands clenching into fists. “I hate you. I hate you! How could you?! He was all I had! How could you do that to me? I trusted you! I hate you. I hate you! I HATE YOU!”

I decided I had made my point and stormed back out, trying to make as much noise as possible with my feet. I resisted the temptation to break something. I was already in enough trouble as it was; I didn’t want to deal with vandalism charges as well.

As I got back to my room I took great pleasure in slamming my door

as hard as I possibly could. It was at this moment that I wished that my door had a lock. I wanted to lock everyone out. Lock them out of my room, out of my head and out of my life. I threw myself facedown onto my bed and buried my head into my pillow, desperately wishing I would suffocate.

“Tell her you want to leave,” Jasper ordered me, reappearing again.

I was getting sick to death of Jasper but I knew, despite everything that had happened, he did have my best interests at heart. I had to start trusting him again.

As soon as Markman opened my door and stuck her bewildered head in, I sat up and informed her of my wishes.

“I want to leave.”

“Why?”

Sometimes, she’s as thick as two fucking planks of wood. Didn’t I make my feelings clear in her office two fucking minutes earlier? “Why do you think?” I snapped.

“Well, you can’t leave.”

“I want a transfer.”

She shook her head. “I can’t do that. Gerard, what is going on? You’ve been acting odd lately. Maybe if you talk to me I could help you?”

“Transfer me.”

She sighed. “No. This isn’t negotiable, Gerard.”

“Fuck you, then.” That was the first time I’d ever swore at Markman to her face. It felt ridiculously good. So good, in fact, that I felt the need to say it again. “Fuck. You,” I repeated and folded my arms defiantly. I emphasised the words this time. It was a fuck you for all the times she tried to convince me I was crazy and for all those fucking bloodtests.

As I swore at Markman she inhaled sharply and fixed her eyes on the floor. She looked hurt. Good. She deserved it.

She stood up, smoothing down her skirt obsessively. “I’ll come back when you have calmed down,” she said softly.

Jasper sprang to his feet. “Tell her you can’t see Frank anymore. Tell her to tell him you can’t see him anymore,” he commanded.

“What!?” I yelped at Jasper in horror. “I can’t do that,” I hissed.

Markman paused and looked at me funny. “Are you talking to me?” she asked suddenly, her eyes darting around the room suspiciously.

“Lie,” Jasper snapped, frowning at me angrily.

“Of course I’m talking to you,” I sniffed, obeying Jasper’s orders and speaking to Markman.

“Course you are,” Markman echoed and walked out the door.

Jasper strode over to where I was sitting on my bed and hauled me to my feet. “Tell her to tell Frank you don’t want to be friends with him anymore,” he ordered, his face an inch from mine.

“I can’t,” I argued weakly.

Jasper shoved me out the door. The noise I made tripping over my feet and stumbling into the doorframe caused Markman to look back at me.

“Tell her or I’ll leave. I am not kidding, Gerard.” Jasper was gripping my right arm tightly and painfully, preventing me from retreating back into my room. “*TELL HER!"*

“I need you to tell Frank I don’t want to be friends with him anymore,” I blurted out and Jasper relinquished his grip on my arm.

Please God, let her not have heard what I just said.

Markman looked past me and I had the sinking feeling that not only had Markman heard what I had said, but so had Frank. I glanced to the side and, sure enough, saw Frank standing in the corridor, betrayal smeared across his beautiful face.

Fuck you, God.

Markman took a step toward Frank, her arms extended slightly in a sympathetic gesture. “Frank,” she said helplessly.

Frank just stared at me. I wished he wouldn’t. I think he was in shock because he didn’t move or blink. He just stared at me, wounded deeply by my words. I hate myself. I hate my life. Number 21 in my

list of bad things: I really am a monster.

Markman observed the whole silent interaction with her hand covering her mouth. I don't know why she cared. Frank would be better off without me. I hope she didn't think I was stupid enough to believe she approved of our friendship… of our relationship.

Frank pale lips began to move as I stared and it took a second for the words to sink in.

"Tell Gerard I don't want to be his friend anymore either," he announced to Markman.

No, no, no, no, no, no. No, this isn't what is supposed to happen. He wasn't supposed to give up so easily. I do want to be your friend. I do. Do you not know me at all? Can't you tell I'm *so obviously* lying?!

Markman moved her gaze from Frank to me, her hand still covering her mouth, in shock, I suspected. I looked away to stare at the linoleum, deeply ashamed and distressed. This was for the best, right? Jasper wouldn't make me do anything that wasn't for my own good. Frank would be safer too, after what happened with *them* last time. I mean, he almost got shot in the back of the head. His brains could have been splattered all over the white and blue tiles of the bathroom and it would have been my entire fault. Just like it was my fault that Michael was dead.

***

It's week two of Intern Week and Brendon is still hanging around. Like usual, I've been making an extra special effort to ignore him but he's fucking persistent. He's always carrying around a notepad with him and jotting down notes. It's like every fucking thing I do is the most fucking interesting thing in the world because it gets written down. I yawn, it gets written down. I sigh, it gets written down. I eat only three bites of dinner, it gets written down.

It's fucking pissing me off.

But being pissed off is a welcome alternative to being devastated. True to both our words, Frank and I are no longer friends. Frank doesn't even glance at me if we happen to pass each other or be in the same room at the same time. He's hanging out with Adam, Ray, Bob and Bert instead. I'm so insanely jealous it hurts. I can't believe my life has gone from liveable to worthless in less than a week.

Jasper, on the other hand, is thrilled about the whole situation.

“Isn’t it great not having to live in fear all the time?” he asked jovially, pacing happily. Now that Frank’s gone he’s the nicest fucking person on the planet.

I didn’t answer and simply pushed my face deeper into my pillow. Asphyxiation here I come.

“Gerard,” Markman called, disturbing me. “You have one minute to get to my office before I suspend all privileges.”

I groaned and made a big show of climbing off the bed and dragging my feet on the way to the door. There was no fucking way I was going to shower with the rest of those imbeciles or allow myself to stay contained to the supervised areas with everyone else. Markman stepped aside and let me past before following me to her office. I traipsed along as slowly as I could bear, purposing stopping and admiring marks on the walls or locks on doors.

“One minute,” Markman reminded me.

I swear she really is as thick as two planks of wood. It’s been at least four minutes already. I know it has. I know things.

Brendon was already waiting inside Markman’s office when I entered. I groaned exaggeratedly at the sight of him and rolled my eyes.

He jotted down what I had just done.

Fuck you, you fucking fuckwit. I swear I will take that pen and shove it up your arse the next time you write down something I do.

I slumped down into the chair and propped my feet up on Markman’s desk, crossing my legs at the ankles. I rested my throbbing head onto the palm of my hand and begun my forty minutes of staring blankly out the window. I’ve had a headache for at least a day now. I would greatly appreciate a couple of painkillers but refuse to ask Markman for them. I’d rather suffer. After all, I did deserve it. I couldn’t remove the image of Frank’s face and the deep betrayal that had covered it from my head.

“Gerard, *please* tell me what’s going on,” Markman implored as soon as she had sat down opposite me.

As if I would tell you, you evil witch.

“Would you prefer to write it down?” Markman stood up and placed a blank sheet of paper and a pencil on my extended legs.

I raised an eyebrow and moved my legs so the paper drifted to the floor. I think I made my point pretty clear.

Markman sighed and shut her eyes for a moment to collect herself. I wish that just once she would crack. “What’s his name?” she asked.

I frowned and glanced sideways at Brendon. Did she mean him?

“Not Brendon,” she said, doing her irritating mind-reading trick. “The other man in the room.”

Horrified, my head snapped to Jasper who was standing stiffly by the mahogany bookcase next to the window. Slowly and menacingly he moved his head from side to side, his narrowed eyes focusing on me intently.

“Gerard….” Markman prompted, her face hopeful.

I swallowed and shook my head quickly. He would kill me. I can see it in his eyes. He would. And why is she asking anyway? Didn’t Frank tell her about Jasper?

“Frank understands,” she said eventually after I refused to answer her question.

At the mention of Frank I stood up and walked out. I didn’t want Markman to see what a huge mistake I had made listening to Jasper. I didn’t want her to see me trying to stop my eyes from leaking. I say leaking because I no matter how hard I try sometimes I can’t stop those few stray drops from sliding down my cheeks.

I avoided everyone for the rest of the week. I stayed in my room and only emerged to eat either at the very beginning or the very end of the hour dedicated to each meal.

On the last day of Intern Week I was sitting miserably, five seats and exactly 3.5 metres away from Frank. The last session the interns are running before they leave is the opposite of the session they ran on the first day. Instead of ten bad things, we had to write down ten good things in our life.

I couldn’t think of one.

That's how fucking sad I am.

I pushed the only good thing in my life away.

***

Today is the six week anniversary of me ruining my life. Frank hasn't attempted to repair our friendship and Jasper has forbidden me from even looking at Frank. The few times I've been unlucky enough to glimpse Frank in one of my brief excursions to the cafeteria, my heart begins to ache even more. It like I'm being eaten from the inside out. My stomach has a constant, despairing weight residing in it and my chest hurts like I've been lying on it for days. Thankfully, my eyes haven't leaked since that time in Markman's office.

I wandered into Markman's office on the morning of the six week anniversary, ready to avoid all her questions about Jasper. It was a miserable day outside. Almost as miserable as I was feeling. The clouds were angry and black and the rain was pelting down so hard I was fearful the roof would cave in again.

I sat down and looked at Markman expectantly. I really wished she would just offer to play scrabble with me. Even though I still hate her I still craved human contact.

"This is the only student who I graded with a high distinction," she told me and handed me over a stack of paper I gathered was a report.

I accepted it with raised eyebrows. What was the point of this?

"Just read it," she said simply and sat back in her chair, clasping her hands together.

I lowered my eyes to the stark white paper and lines of words and began to read.

Bluestone Institute
By Brendon Urie

I'm not too proud to admit how naïve I must have been at the commencement of my placement as Bluestone Psychiatric Facility in Princeton, New Jersey last week. Since junior high I have aspired to become a doctor and subsequently, a psychiatrist. Therefore, this meant I was thrilled to discover I would be spending two preliminary weeks of my intern year at Bluestone Institute, the country's leading facility for psychiatric care in young adults. At the orientation week,

my fellow interns and I were informed of our primary means of assessment for the duration of the placement. Upon being told of the task I admit to being disappointed. Each intern was allocated a patient for which we had to write a report on. The report could be as clinical or as personal as we liked. The rationale behind my disappointment was entrenched in the fact that I had been looking forward to treating and counselling patients, not just observing them like caged animals.

I had been assigned to a nineteen year old male patient named Gerard. I was given scant details on Gerard, compared to the information my fellow interns received on their own individual patients. Unperturbed, however, at my lack of knowledge on Gerard, I attended the first day of my placement with high expectations. I, like many of the other interns, expected to form an immediate close bond with my patient in the short time I had. I had already made plans to use this bond to gain useful insight into his persona and mental condition to assist in the writing of this report.

Gerard ignored me for the entire duration of my placement. I can honestly say Gerard and I made eye-contact an estimated total of five times during the two weeks. However, despite this lack of communication and interaction I gathered extremely quickly that Gerard is an incredibly intelligent young man. Everything he does, right down to the way he walks, is part of a highly methodical plan. When I came to this conclusion I decided to take the opportunity to verify this inference with certain members of the staff who 'know' Gerard.

I could not find one staff member who was willing to support my inference of Gerard's supposed systematic functioning. Many of the staff members argued quite convincingly that Gerard was quite famed in the institution for his unpredictability. The prime example I was given of Gerard's 'unpredictability' was an instance that occurred less than twelve months ago. Up until this time Gerard was "selectively mute", "remarkably anti-social" and "disinterested in all aspects of his existence." However, he managed to astound both the patients and the psychiatrists alike by electing to interact with another patient (Iero, Frank. Age: 18, #22013) during a group therapy session. Since this time, I have been told that both young men have been inseparable.

Other notable examples of Gerard's unpredictability are inherent in the symptoms of his mental illness. Gerard suffers from paranoid schizophrenia. More notably, he suffers from *treatment resistant* paranoid schizophrenia. Although I was not able to verify this myself, I discovered that Gerard suffers from very vivid delusions of

persecution. He believes that he is being hunted by an establishment he refers to only as 'them' and that they are seeking to "cut open his head and steal his secrets." Additionally, Gerard is convinced that should 'they' succeed in their attempt to "kill him" and steal his secrets, the world, "will end."

Gerard denies that he is mentally ill. Whenever the topic is brought up he withdraws noticeably. His treating psychiatrist Dr. Jillian Markman did disclose that Gerard had in fact gone through a phase of acceptance several years ago but relapsed as a result of a "severe head trauma." Since the trauma Gerard has struggled with severe trust and emotional issues.

It was because of these well-established trust issues that Gerard's friendship with Frank Iero was regarded with such speculation and amazement. Gerard, who has a long history of callous and selfish behaviour, terminated their friendship on the first day of my placement. This random act of what was regarded as 'cruelty' by several members of the staff has set Frank's emotional recovery back significantly. My exposure to their friendship was brief but I can only imagine the joy it bought them both, considering the level of pure misery I encountered from them –

I couldn't make myself turn the page. I couldn't bear to read anymore. I was only two pages into the report and already I was struggling to differentiate between the lies and the truths. I didn't know when Brendon was lying and when he was simply stating the facts and the observations he'd made. The lies were so deeply ingrained into the words that they were even starting to fool me. I'm not mentally ill. I'm not 'remarkably anti-social'. I don't suffer from treatment resistant paranoid schizophrenia. I don't even know what the fuck that is! *They* are not a delusion. *I've seen* them. I didn't just make them up! Why the fuck would he think I make shit like that up? Just to amuse myself!? Fucking hell.

And another thing! What is this "severe head trauma" I'd *apparently* been inflicted with? I think I'd remember if I'd hit my head! I'm not a fucking child.

"What is this?" I snarled, brandishing the paper crossly.

"The truth, Gerard," Markman replied, all shrink-like.

No, it's fucking not.

“How does it make you feel?”

“Like shit! I don’t want strangers writing lies and shit about me and letting other people read it. Who else has seen this?”

I will hunt down every copy of this paper and burn it. I swear I will.

Markman leant forward and picked up her pen. “Just me.”

Thank fuck for that. She really is an evil witch. My hate for her is slowly being justified.

“None of this is true. How could you grade this so high *knowing* he was lying? Don’t you feel hurt that he thought you were so stupid you wouldn’t notice when he was making stuff up?” I raised my eyebrows, questioning her.

“Are you going to finish it?” she inquired.

“No,” I replied stubbornly and folded my arms across my chest.

“Well, maybe you should read this,” she said brusquely and tossed another paper at me.

I scowled and picked it up off the beige carpet.

Alive
By Spencer Smith

I was assigned to 18 year old male patient, Frank Iero. Frank has been receiving psychiatric treatment at Bluestone Institute since June last year. Frank was admitted to Bluestone after suffering a psychological breakdown after being sexually assaulted and abused by two men. It was five months after the incident that the psychological breakdown occurred and as a result, Frank was admitted into Newark Base Mental Facility. Frank spent less than a month in this facility before his case was singled out by highly regarded and renowned psychiatrist, Dr. Jillian Markman and he was transferred to Bluestone Institute, the country’s foremost institution for young adults.

I paused for a moment. Why was everyone so keen to praise Markman? I mean, come on, seriously? Do they know who they are talking about? Renowned? Does she have some secret celebrity patients on the side or something? I scanned a few paragraphs,

skipping past all the preliminary stuff I already knew.

Frank was remarkably polite and co-operative during my placement. He participated in all the activities and conversed with me quite willingly. However, having come from a loving and financially stable home environment and having little exposure to despair, it took me just over a week to realise that Frank is an exceptionally sad young man. It took me another week to then work up the courage to ask him what it was that he was so sad about. He replied with a name: Gerard.

This shocked me. I was expecting Frank to perhaps mention the abuse he'd been subjected to, or the mental anguish that resulted from it, but I was wrong. Gerard is another patient at the facility. He is an insolent young man with no respect for others. He cut Frank, his only friend, out of his life after Frank confronted him about his behaviour. Just as I was thinking of something to say to Frank, he surprised me even further by saying: "But he also makes me so happy." When I asked why he just smiled and shook his head. "You wouldn't understand," he told me. "No one understands him. But he understands me. He makes me forget. He makes me feel special. He makes me feel alive."

"I don't want to read this anymore," I muttered and held the report out for Markman to take.

But she didn't accept it. "I want you to read it. I want you to know," she said. "I want you to realise that you are not the only person in this facility, Gerard. I want you to stop and think of someone else for a change."

I hated that she thought of me in that way. Of course I knew that I wasn't the only person in the facility. And Frank is all I ever think about. This mess was Jasper's fault. Jasper made me do it.

I twisted around in my chair searching for Jasper but he didn't appear to be in the room. I couldn't see him but that didn't mean he wasn't hiding. I stood up and hurried to check behind the curtains and under the lounge. It wouldn't surprise me if he was hiding under there. He would wait for me to betray him, then appear from an absurd spot and punish me.

Markman stood up and followed me with her eyes as I searched the room. There weren't many places where an aging war veteran could hide but there were enough to keep me occupied for five minutes. Markman didn't comment on what I was doing. It was like she was

waiting for me to tell her.

“Looking for me?” Jasper announced his presence smugly from his favourite spot next to the bookcase.

My heart sank and I gazed at him horror. He was always hanging around. Why wouldn’t he just leave me alone like he used to? I remained kneeling, despair overtaking me. I was so exhausted. I was so sick of everything. I couldn’t do it anymore.

“What’s his name, Gerard?” Markman asked sympathetically.

Why did she keep asking me that?! She knew his name. Frank knew about Jasper. Frank had been talking to Markman about me. She should know. Frank would have told her. He thinks I’m sick. But I’m not sick. I’m not crazy.

“I can’t help you if you don’t tell me,” she pleaded.

I didn’t want to look up from the carpet. I didn’t want to be here anymore. I didn’t want to be scared anymore.

Markman came over and crouched down next to me. “Let me help you,” she whispered.

“You already know,” I muttered.

“I do?”

“Frank told you and you told him I was crazy. I’m not crazy.”

“What?”

I glanced up at her. She was confused. She was *genuinely* confused. Frank did tell her, right?

“Frank has never said anything like that about you to me.”

He didn’t? I scrambled to my feet. “I can’t talk about this anymore,” I announced and scampered out the door, leaving Jasper and Markman behind me. As I walked aimlessly I ran over Frank’s words in my head.

“Gerard, there’s no one there.”

“They’re not real, Gerard.”

No. You’re talking to no one. There’s no one there.”

What if Frank wasn't lying? What if I was crazy? What if I did make Jasper up? I mean, Frank wouldn't lie about this, would he? No one else has ever commented on Jasper. He's not exactly the most inconspicuous person around. Is that why I'm here? Is that why I'm in this fucking place? Am I crazy? Is Frank right? Frank was and still is the only person I trust and vice versa. He let me touch him. He asked me to kiss him. He has no reason to lie. Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh, God.

Oh, my fucking God. I'm a fucking nut job.

Is this the reason why I killed my brother? Surely that's the only reason why I would do such a thing. Maybe I wasn't in my right mind. Maybe it *was* an accident. Maybe it was Jasper's fault. Maybe it wasn't my fault after all. What would that mean? If that's true, that means that Frank was right all along. He always said that it wasn't my fault. Maybe it wasn't. Maybe it was just an accident. Why can't I remember?

I was concentrating so hard that I got a shock when I almost walked into Jasper. I cringed away from him. "Leave me alone," I snapped and tried to push past him.

"Don't talk to me like that!" Jasper raged.

"I can talk to you however I like. You're not real." Now from this moment on things were going to get very interesting.

Jasper, to my intense surprise, smirked. "Oh, really?" he said arrogantly.

I kept walking. "You're not real. Frank said he can't see you. I believe Frank," I said, my voice quavering. I wasn't even convincing myself, how did I think I was going to convince Jasper?

"Frank?" Jasper roared with laughter. "You still hung up on him?"

"I trust him," I muttered.

"No!" Jasper snatched my arm and pulled me around to face him. "You trust *me*. I'm the one who's saved your arse all those times. I'm the one who stopped *them* from getting to you."

I wrenched myself from his grasp. "Frank had nothing to gain and everything to lose confronting me like that. I shouldn't have listened to you."

Jasper stopped smirking. “He’s lying to you, Gerard. He has been from the start. He’s in league with them. Just like *she* is.”

“No,” I said suddenly. “He’s not lying. You’re not real. You’re in my head. I made you up.”

Jasper pinched me hard on the bicep. “Of course I’m real. If I wasn’t real could I do this?” He punched me on the arm. “You felt that. You know I’m real. If I was made up would you really be able to feel me?”

That was an exceptionally good point. I was losing this argument. I didn’t have an answer. If Jasper was real, why could I feel him? That didn’t make sense. Maybe I wasn’t crazy. I felt rather hopeful for a minute.

“Gerard?” Markman had appeared again.

Jesus Fucking Christ! Why doesn’t that woman leave me alone?!

“Why are you always following me? Why don’t you understand I don’t like you?” I asked irritably.

“No, Gerard, why don’t *you* understand? I’m not going anywhere. I’m always going to follow you. I’m always going to stick around. I’m never going to give up on you. I will always be here. I will be here whether you want me to or not. I think it’s time you got used to it. I’m not like everyone else, Gerard. I refuse to give up on you.”

Oh. Maybe she really did give a shit.

“You give a shit?” I inquired doubtfully.

Markman sighed. “*Yes*, Gerard. I give a shit.”

“So do I,” Jasper interjected angrily.

I turned away from them both and tried to swallow but my throat felt like sandpaper. In my head I added the final two bad things to my list.

22. I’m crazy.

23. I’m *alone.*

Nobody Said Loving Him Was Going To Be Easy

There are bad things in life. There are bad things and then there are *bad* things.

There is a fucking camera in my fucking room.

This is one of those *bad* things I speak of. No, in fact it is one of those *very bad* things that I thought only existed in movies.

She is watching me.

The fucking bitch is spying on me. I cannot fucking believe I didn't see that fucking camera for so fucking long.

I'm so fucking angry I could punch a wall. Yes, *that* angry.

This is one of those moments where I am glad I never jacked off in my bed.

Next time I see Markman I will make sure she knows exactly what I think about this whole spying thing. Fucking Christ, I get dressed in here. I will never be able to look at her again if she's seen me naked.

I glared up at the offending piece of technology. I wonder if she's watching me right now. Narrowing my eyes suspiciously at the lens, I stood up and made my way to breakfast. I was determined to confront Markman about this as soon as possible. Fucking bitch, no one spies on me.

I stormed into the cafeteria and up to the food counter. As I poured out some disgusting unidentified cereal that was probably packed with an astronomical amount of sugar, I resisted the urge to throw it all over the floor. Even though I was treated very leniently by the staff in this hell hole I knew that Ben wouldn't hesitate in making me pick up every single little flake. I didn't want to waste time crawling around the floor. I needed to finish my food quickly and then find Satan.

I slammed my bowl of cereal down onto my table and took a tiny amount of satisfaction in the amount of mess I made. I didn't care. Someone else would clean it up. This whole spying thing has put me

in a shitty mood. Maybe I should insult someone. That could help to improve my mood.

I scanned the room for potential victims. As per usual my 'built-in Frank homing device' activated and the first person I laid eyes upon was Frank. I really need to find a manual on how to disable this stupid thing. Frank was sitting with his new best friends: Bob, Ray and Adam. I didn't know where Bert was. I haven't seen him in a while. But besides, I couldn't insult any of them when Frank was around. It was obvious that Frank's opinion of me was akin to that of seaweed and I didn't want to be downgraded to pond algae anytime soon. So, they were off-limits.

I could probably say something to Ben or Zach but they rarely ever reacted to my insults or sarcasm. I don't think they get paid enough to indulge me by reacting. That didn't leave me with very many options. Fuck.

I shovelled three spoonfuls of cereal into my mouth in quick succession so my cheeks were bulging. As I chewed I glanced up and saw Frank glance my way. We made eye contact and the corners of the mouth twitched, like he was trying not to smile. It cheered me up significantly. I didn't care that he was probably smiling at my immaturity. He was smiling. At me, no less.

I wonder if I should go over there? Does Frank smiling at me mean he's not angry with me anymore? Yes.

No.

I should. Maybe I should apologise?

No.

Yes.

Fucking hell, Gerard, make up your mind.

Ok, no, I won't go over there. I won't move. Not a good idea. No.

I sighed and refocused my attention on the cereal. It was definitely new and I had been wrong about it before. It was practically sugarless. It must be some new 'healthy' cereal because it tastes like little, cut up circles of cardboard. It was probably Markman's idea to change the cereal. I knew I could rely on her to make our lives miserable, one cereal flake at a time.

Even though, at the time, I half believed her when she said she gave a shit about me, I'd since been forced to change my opinion. She doesn't give a shit about me. She doesn't trust me. She put a camera in my room. She thinks I'm going to be getting up to mischief in there and she can't bear to not know what I'm doing.

I'm going to ignore the fact that, technically speaking, I did do something I shouldn't have in that room. Three nights ago I was lying in the darkness of my room and a wave of guilt swept over me. It was guilt over how I kissed Frank. It didn't matter that he requested it. I was supposed to have said no. That must be why he didn't fight for me. If he cared about me the way I did about him he would've told me I was being stupid and that Jasper isn't the boss of me. But he didn't.

Therefore I have come to the conclusion that I am better off without him. That's why I'm not going to go over to him and apologise. You can't try to be friends with someone if they don't feel about you the same way you feel about them. So here I am, alone again. Just the way I should've stayed.

Frank didn't glance at me again. I didn't care.

Ok, yes, I did care, but I'm learning not to.

As Frank and his new friends left their tables to sit outside, I purposely turned my back on them and stared down the corridor that lead to Markman's office. Surely she would surface soon.

Half an hour later I was still staring at that corridor. Satan had still not risen. I sighed and adjusted my legs to a more comfortable position.

"What are you doing?" Ben asked suspiciously and stood next to me. He bent over to my eye level and peered down the corridor.

Without moving my eyes from the passage I replied, "Nothing."

Ben straightened up and frowned at me. Well, I think he frowned at me. I wasn't quite sure; I hadn't moved my eyes from the corridor.

"Gerard?" he said reproachfully.

I sighed again and took a moment to rub my eyes. "Waiting," I informed him.

"For who?"

“For Jesus,” I snapped. “Who do you think?”

Ben took a step back and studied me. “Are you being serious?”

I was tempted to say I was, but I decided to be sensible. “Of course I’m not being serious. I’m not mad.”

I knew that Ben was tempted to argue with me on that last point but he didn’t. He remained very professional.

“I’m waiting for Markman,” I informed him.

“*Doctor* Markman,” Ben corrected. “But don’t bother, she’s not here.”

I tore my eyes away from the corridor. “What?!” I exclaimed angrily. “But I *need* to speak with her. It’s urgent!”

“You may speak to Dr. Leto instead….” Ben trailed off as I made a disgusted noise at the alternative he was offering.

“I’d rather eat nails,” I muttered and set my head down on the table.

Ben gathered that the conversation was over and left, leaving me alone in the large cafeteria. I cannot believe that she is not here. I swear she plans it. Bad things always happen when she’s not around. Dr. Leto seems to attract bad things.

Maybe she’s purposely avoiding me. Maybe she knows that I discovered the camera and she doesn’t want to have to face my wrath. I can be pretty intimidating when I’m angry. I must’ve learnt that from Jasper. Speaking of Jasper, he seems to have disappeared again. I’m not complaining though. I hate him.

I’m becoming more and more convinced that he’s just a hallucination. Not that I’d ever admit that to Markman. It just fits. I’ll never be fully convinced however, because that would mean I’d have to admit I was crazy. And I’m not crazy. Nope. Ray is crazy. Me? No, I just have minor hallucinations and that can be caused by anything.

Hell, I could have a brain tumour. That would explain a lot. It would explain why Markman is so fascinated with CT scans of my brain. I must remember to speak to her about that as well; if I ever see her again.

My self-diagnosing was interrupted by the noisy and attention-grabbing arrival of Bert into the cafeteria. He was babbling wildly

about something; I couldn't discern what though. I did notice that he seemed rather panicked about something. I glanced up at him and followed his erratic movements across the room, mildly worried at how he was acting. He finally came to a stop in front of my table. He was trembling as he pointed his finger at me accusingly.

"You!" he snarled and spat at me.

That is so fucking disgusting. I smacked the table with my hands as I leapt to my feet. "You got something to say to me, Bert!?" I snarled back, taking a menacing step toward him.

Bert scurried backwards several paces. "You told him where I was. You said you wouldn't! I'll get you back for this!" he cried.

Okay, now I was confused. I raised an eyebrow and remained silent. Bert bared his teeth at me like a wild animal and darted towards the double doors that lead to the courtyard.

"What's the only thing cold little Gerard cares about?" Bert yelled and ran away into the garden.

I didn't understand what he was talking about until I saw who he was approaching. I swear, if he lays a *finger* on Frank I'll break his neck. I dashed outside and over to where Bert was accosting Frank; curling my right hand into a fist as I got closer.

"We're all going to die!" Bert was screaming at Frank. "And it's all your precious little Gerard's fault. You made him like this. He wasn't going to tell! But you made him tell! It's your fault too!"

Frank was taking wary steps backwards as Bert screamed in his face. "Bert, please calm down," he said assertively. "It's not my fault."

"You bet it is, you filthy faggot," Bert spat just as I drew up behind him.

Hurt and shame flooded Frank's face and he dropped his eyes to the grass, mortified and humiliated. That made me mad. So mad I wanted to hurt Bert so bad. I wanted him to feel the pain he'd caused Frank with his cruel comments. All the anger from this morning when I'd found out that Markman was spying on me reared up inside. I know I said I was so angry I wanted to punch a wall; but I took more delight in the thought of punching Bert's face.

"Oi, fucker," I snapped and raised my right hand.

Bert turned to confront me but he never made it because I slammed my fist into the side of his face with all the force and anger I could muster. His head snapped to the side and he fell heavily to his knees, his hands clutching his face. A few moments passed and nobody moved. I glanced at Frank but he was staring at Bert, his face white. Just when I thought it was over, Bert shakily regained his feet and took a step toward me, spitting out blood as he did. I didn't move. I didn't want him to think I was just going to run away from him. He stopped and pointed at the tree to my right.

"His children are here. He'll be here soon. I hope he eats you first," he said, his voice thick and with blood dribbling from his mouth.

I made the mistake at glancing to my right and frowning at the tiny lizard perched innocently on the trunk of the tree. Just as I took my eyes off Bert, he lunged at me. I toppled over backwards and landed with a bone-rattling thump on the hard ground under the tree. Within a second of landing on the ground, Bert was on top of me, exerting his revenge on my poor face. In the space of four seconds, Bert managed to slam his fist into the side of face three times in very quick succession. It made me suspect that he had previous experience in beating someone up.

I've never been punched before in my life and I never realised how much it hurt. The pain was fierce. It felt like a rogue freight train had smashed into my face. The amount of force Bert managed to put behind his fist was incredible. Every blow sent my face snapping to the side and I was struggling to draw in a single breath. It was at this moment when I regretted punching Bert first. If I had known he was capable of pulverising my face I probably would've thought twice about defending Frank in such a way.

It took another two blows to my lower jaw before my vision went funny. Bright lights seemed to explode in front of my eyes and I couldn't see. Sometime in that period of blindness I felt Bert's weight disappear from my stomach. I blinked rapidly and saw that Bob and Ray had physically lifted Bert off me and they were struggling to restrain him from jumping onto me again.

"Is that all you got?" I mocked, turning my head to the side and letting the blood dribble out.

Big mistake.

Bert launched back towards me, ripping his arms from Bob's and Ray's

grasp. He winded me when he landed on my stomach and I hadn't had a chance to take a breath before his slimy, blood-covered hands seized my exposed throat. The panic welled up almost immediately as I realised that I couldn't breathe at all. I couldn't even swallow. I raised my hands and grabbed his wrists, attempting to drag them away from my throat. That was when I felt really scared. I didn't understand how he was managing to overpower me. My legs kicked out unproductively and didn't seem to disturb Bert at all.

I couldn't even estimate how long Bert had been choking me for. I just know it seemed like an hour before three orderlies grabbed Bert and pinned him to the ground. I sucked in the air greedily and gingerly clutched my throat. My mouth was still filled with blood and I rolled over onto my stomach to let it drain out onto the grass. I felt around my mouth with my tongue tenderly, hoping to God that I still had all my teeth. Luckily I felt no new hollows in my gums. Thank fuck for that.

I did have a massive cut along the inside of my mouth, right on the left cheek; the one that Bert's fist seemed to favour. I slowly pushed myself up into a kneeling position and hunched over, watching in fascination at the amount of blood that seemed to flowing from my nose and dripping onto the grass. It was ridiculously gross how most of it was flowing into my mouth though. Someone pushed a towel into my hand and I held it to my nose in a futile attempt to stem the flow. I don't think my nose is broken though, thank god. It was only slightly tender to touch and it seemed to still be in position. The left side of my face, however, was throbbing already. It was a deep, gnawing throb that radiated through to my bone. It was hot to touch, which I knew indicated inflammation. It was good to know that I learnt something off those useless TV medical sitcoms I was often forced to watch.

"Gerard? Can you hear me?" It was Dr. Leto, sounding very concerned and anxious. It didn't suit him.

"Hmmm," I replied and opened my eyes.

"We need to get you inside. Can you stand?"

"Hmmm," I repeated and mustered up all my energy. I clutched at the several hands that were being offered to me and let them pull me to my feet. As soon as I was on my feet my knees gave out from under me, but strong hands kept me up. I really have no clue what is going on. I think I'll just concentrate on holding this towel to my face.

Somehow, I ended up in the infirmary, perched awkwardly on a gurney with half a dozen people buzzing around urgently. Dr. Leto took the towel away from my nose and I almost threw up as I saw the mass of congealed blood on the white material. My stomach was churning unbearably and I had a strong suspicion that it was from the blood I'd swallowed. One of the nurses, the new female one who was incredibly tall, passed me an ice pack and instructed me to hold it to my face. I was going to do everything I was told because hopefully everyone will be so concerned about me that they'll forget to reprimand me. By everyone I mean Markman, of course. Here's to futile hope.

Dr. Leto flashed a torch in my eyes. He frowned and flashed it again. I was worried for a second until he said, "Pupil response normal." The tall nurse nodded and made a quick note in what I guessed was my file, before ticking a box on the sheet of paper in her hand. I tried to see what she was writing but Dr. Leto pushed me back down.

"Follow my finger, Gerard," Dr. Leto instructed holding his finger in front of my nose. I sighed and did as I was told. Dr. Leto seemed satisfied with my response and that earned me another tick.

"Are you feeling dizzy?" he asked.

"No."

"Do you have blurred vision?"

"No."

"Is your hearing normal?"

"Yes."

"Do you feel drowsy?"

"No."

"Do you know who I am?"

"Yes," I sighed, aggravated. I was already getting sick of the questions. "I'm fine," I announced.

"Who am I? What's my name?" Dr. Leto ignored my declaration and continued with the questions.

I smirked. I wanted *so badly* to something witty and rude but I really

shouldn't. Oh, what the hell. He deserved it.

"You're the incompetent doctor who overdosed me on Valium," I declared.

All the nurses stopped to look at Dr. Leto who was slowly going red. Red with anger – mind you – not from embarrassment. He glowered at me and slammed his torch down onto the table.

"He's fine," Dr. Leto growled and stormed from the room

"I'm fine," I repeated and nodded reassuringly at the nurses who seemed quite amused. "Can I go now?" I had business to take care of.

The tall nurse who I swear must be a supermodel wouldn't let me leave. She made me lie back and hold that inhumanly cold icepack against my face. The ice has caused the side of my face to go numb so I can't feel much pain. Bonus. My nose has stopped bleeding too. Another bonus.

"Why can't I do this somewhere else?" I inquired trying to make conversation with the supermodel.

"You need to be kept under observation," she said, handing me a new icepack.

"But Dr. Leto said I'm fine. Really I am. No brain injury, *I swear*!"

"Dr. Markman says to keep you under observation until she arrives."

My stomach twisted uncomfortably. They were going to keep me captive until she came to kill me? That's just mean.

I guess though that it wasn't really my place to punch Bert like that. I probably should've let Markman take care of it. It's all her fault. If she hadn't been spying on me, I wouldn't have been angry in the first place. And if I wasn't angry I wouldn't have been so hasty to pummel Bert. See, her fault.

But then again, she wouldn't have seen the look of Frank's face. He was already ashamed of himself after what had happened; he didn't need Bert saying shit like, "filthy faggot" to his face.

There's nothing wrong with being a faggot. I should know.

I hope Frank's okay. I really need to get out of here and see him. I just need to find him and tell him that he's perfect the way he is. He is

beautiful. I need to reassure him of that.

I spent the next hour thinking of ways to explain to Frank about how Bert was full of shit and how he shouldn't be ashamed or embarrassed. In fact, I was so deep in thought that I didn't hear the clopping of high heels until the owner of them was standing in the doorway. I swallowed as Markman observed me from the doorway. I braced myself for the yelling or the lecture but it never came. She didn't say a word. That didn't mean she wasn't mad. It actually meant she was ridiculously mad. It meant she was fuming. It was surprising that steam wasn't escaping from her ears.

Markman walked over to the counter and picked up Dr. Leto's torch. I sat up automatically and looked at the notice on new CPR regulations pinned to the wall behind Markman. I stared at the notice and avoided all eye contact. I didn't even look at her as I followed her finger across my line of sight. When she stepped away to look at the notes Dr. Leto had written I noticed that all the nurses had left the room. Panic rose in my throat. How could they leave me like that?!

Markman snapped my file shut and glanced up at the clock on the wall. "You have thirty seconds to explain yourself," she ordered furiously.

I glanced at the clock too. The second hand was just passing the two. That gave me until it reached the eight to save myself from eternal damnation. Shit I just wasted three seconds. I inhaled deeply. "It wasn't my fault," I proclaimed. Okay, that wasn't a complete lie; he did spit at me first.

Markman didn't reply. She just stood there, grinding her teeth until my thirty seconds were up. I didn't say anything else in my defence. I was already sunk.

"It is my understanding that you hit Bert first?" Markman said calmly.

"Hmmm," I murmured, keeping my response ambiguous.

"That means you started it." That was not a question.

Geez, what is this? Jerry Springer? I really don't think this is a case of who started what.

"Am I correct, Gerard?"

"Yeah, well, he continued it!" I hesitated. "That's just as bad, you

know?"

"Okay," Markman said simply.

I was shocked. No, she wasn't supposed to just end the conversation like that. I still needed to argue my case. I decided to tell her about what Bert said.

"He called Frank a 'filthy faggot'," I said, feeling a little bit of anger well up. I curled my right hand into a fist and winced at the pain that shot through it.

Markman stood very still and closed her eyes for a second. "Oh," she breathed softly.

"He didn't tell you that, did he?" I guessed.

Markman shook her head at me. "No, he did not," she said, weighing each word as she said it.

"I'm not saying that justifies what I did, but you have to understand, no one deserves to be called that," I informed her.

"I know. I agree." Markman seem to be deep in thought. She sat down and pulled my folder onto her lap. I watched as she began writing something down. I didn't even bother trying to see what she was writing. It just wasn't worth it right now.

I swung my legs under the gurney and suddenly remembered some of the things I needed to ask her. I decided to start lightly.

"Do I have a brain tumour?" I asked, trying – and failing – to act nonchalant.

Markman looked up at me and the look on her face alarmed me. I don't really have a brain tumour, do I? Holy shit, maybe I do. Maybe that's why I see Jasper. It must be inoperable. Does this mean I am going to die? I know I've said I've wanted to die in the past but I was only kidding.

"Not that I'm aware of," Markman said eventually.

My heart rate slowed down again. "Then why do you have such an interest in my brain and keep doing scans?" I persisted.

Markman wet her lips as she thought. She seemed to be quite reluctant to answer my question. "Well," she began and I sat forward

eagerly. Was she finally going to be honest with me about something? "A few years ago you had an accident."

I didn't remember that. I didn't remember a lot of things from a few years ago. "What was the accident?" I asked eagerly.

Markman took a deep breath and paused for a long moment. Finally she said, "It was just an accident."

I made an annoyed noise in my throat. "Was it a car accident? Or a sporting accident? What was it? Tell me?!" I demanded.

"No. Do you want to know about the scans or not?" she said brusquely. I went quiet and let her continue. "You had an accident and it lead to some brain damage. We like to do regular scans to keep an eye on things. That's all."

That's all? My mouth went dry and my stomach lurched. I had brain damage? I can't have brain damage. I feel fine. I raised my free hand to hold my head. There was something wrong with my brain?! No, no, that can't be. I have secrets in there. I can't keep the world's secrets in a damaged brain.

Markman stood up and came over to me. She grabbed my hand that was clawing at my skull and held it. "I knew I shouldn't have told you," she said regrettably.

"I have secrets in here," I whispered wretchedly.

"I know. It's going to be okay. You are fine. Really. I promise."

I looked at her doubtfully. I wasn't fine. Not even a little bit. Markman sat back down and began writing some more notes. I lay back down on the bed, still clutching the ice pack to my face. I stared at the ceiling, remembering the night when Frank had snuck in here and asked me for the first time to kiss him. That made my heart hurt, along with my head.

I spied the camera in the corner of the room and my original reason for wanting to speak to Markman flooded back into my consciousness. I sat up again and pointed my finger at Markman.

"There's a camera in my room," I accused.

Markman didn't react like I'd expected her too. She didn't even look up. "Yes," she said absently. "There are cameras in all the rooms."

“All the rooms?!” I repeated, horrified.

“Except the bathrooms,” she amended.

“That’s a serious breach of privacy!” I cried.

Markman looked up at me. She was confused as to what I was angry about. I’ll tell her what I’m so angry about. “You’re spying on us!” I exclaimed.

“Hardly,” she scoffed. “The footage is only examined when necessary. It’s really only used to determine the causes of disputes or accidents or other incidences.”

I huffed, annoyed that she had counteracted my argument.

Now it was Markman’s turn to sit forward. “Why are you so concerned, Gerard?” she inquired, narrowing her eyes at me.

“I’m not,” I answered automatically.

“Have you been doing things you shouldn’t have?” she persisted.

“No,” I retorted and looked away from her. I glanced back just in time to see her smile as she settled back into the chair. “Hang on,” I said suspiciously and Markman looked up innocently. “You know something?”

“No, I don’t.”

Ha! First sign of guilt is to deny the accusation. My eyes widened. “You know?”

She knew. She knew about me and Frank. I could see it. I could *sense* it. Holy fucking hell. I have never been more embarrassed in my life.

“Know about what?”

“About me and Frank?” I said, watching closely for her reaction.

She tried to pretend like she had no idea what I was talking about but she failed miserably. “I don’t know anything,” she lied quickly.

“How do you know?” I demanded. “You said you didn’t watch the footage! You said so!”

Markman was becoming increasingly more flustered. “I didn’t,” she

insisted.

I leapt off the gurney and let the ice pack fall onto the floor as I realised. “He told you.”

Markman avoided my eye contact which was all I needed to confirm my fears. “He told you,” I repeated, shattered. It seemed that mine and Frank’s little secret wasn’t a secret at all. “Why would he do that?” I asked.

“Gerard….” Markman said awkwardly and stood up.

“Why would he tell you?” I asked the question again, determined to get an answer.

“I will not repeat anything Frank has said to me, especially not to you,” she said gently, brushing me off.

Angrily, I kicked the ice pack and sent it skidding across the tiles. I needed an answer. If Markman was going to obey those stupid doctor-patient confidentiality rules then I would confront Frank myself. I crossed the room in three long strides and pulled the door open so hard I felt like it should’ve come off its hinges. I ignored Markman’s orders to stop and marched towards the cafeteria. I stuck my head in but Frank was not at any of the tables. No matter, he was probably in his room.

I was correct, as usual. I took a moment to knock before entering. I didn’t know the full story yet, so I couldn’t be mad at Frank. Markman could’ve tortured him to get him to tell her what we’d done. Who knows?

“Oh, Gerard? Are you okay?” Frank asked immediately as soon as he saw me. He was lying on his bed, staring up at the ceiling. I liked to do that too. But that wasn’t the issue here.

“You told her!” I exclaimed, ignoring his question.

Frank froze, halfway off the bed. “She told you?” he whispered, horrified.

I gritted my teeth together. “She didn’t have to,” I muttered angrily. “Why would you tell her?” I was baffled. I didn’t understand why Frank would possibly want to tell something as personal as that to Markman. Now, Ray, I’d understand, but Markman?!

Frank looked upset. “You don’t understand!” he yelled at me.

“Well make me!” I yelled back.

He stood up and marched over to me. “I needed to tell someone,” he said, his voice more measured.

“Why?” I said sarcastically. “Was it that bad?”

“No, it wasn’t, actually,” he sniffed. I felt guilty now. Great, thanks, Frank.

“I thought it was supposed to be *our* secret. I didn’t realise we were blabbing to our therapists. Do you always kiss and tell?”

As soon as that last line left my mouth I regretted it. I knew what I was implying and it was terrible. The only other people Frank had been kissed by were scum.

“I’m sorry,” I said immediately but it was useless. Frank had already processed what I had said and he was crushed. Devastated. Betrayed. It was so obvious. I had sunk to Bert’s level.

Frank bit his bottom lip and dropped his eyes to the floor. “I felt guilty,” he said. “When you feel worthless for so long, you feel guilty every time you feel happiness. I needed someone to tell me that is was okay to feel like that. That’s all.”

“Fra –,” I began but he cut me off.

“Please leave.”

My heart was breaking into a thousand little pieces. I could feel them falling through my body; the sharp shards causing spasms of pain throughout my entire body. I took several steps backwards until I was standing just outside the room. Frank shut the door in my face. I had done it now. I had ruined us both.

My face was throbbing again and I began the long walk of shame back to the infirmary. I had only made it halfway when Bob and Ray called me. The first several times I ignored them, but they were persistent. Eventually I turned around and followed them into Ray’s room, just so they would shut up.

“What are you doing?” Ray queried.

“I’m talking to you,” I replied, wondering why I was stating the

obvious.

“No. Wrong answer.”

I waited a second but he didn’t tell me what the right answer was. I turned to leave.

“Why are you walking away from him?” Bob threw his hands up in the air.

“What?” I said, genuinely confused now. I didn’t have time for this.

Ray and Bob smiled at each other and shared a look. “Should we tell him?” Ray asked.

Bob nodded; his face was the epitome of seriousness. “I think he has a right to know. The colours don’t lie.”

My eyes widened. Why was I always the one stuck with the crazy people? Why were crazy people attracted to me? Was it the way I smelled? Was it the way I did my hair? I mean, what the fuck?

Ray spent a good ten seconds scanning the room. He looked in every corner and even under the bed. I had no clue what he was searching for. In fact, I didn’t want to know. He cleared his throat like he was about to make a very important announcement. “I have a message for you,” he said in a creepy undertone.

I didn’t even bother reacting.

“We are certain it’s for you,” Bob added.

“Positive,” Ray echoed. “You see, I got my cereal this morning and it gave me a message. It was a pretty important message too. I mean, this message could make or break someone.”

Even though I was secretly ridiculing them both, I was actually interested as to what the message actually was. Sometimes, Ray comes up with some fucking awesome messages. He says things that really make you go, “Wow, how on earth did he come up with that?”

“And then we realised that it was for *you*,” Ray exclaimed. “You know how we know?”

“No,” I answered honestly. I had no fucking clue.

“I had three red coloured pieces and four blue coloured pieces of

cereal in my bowl this morning. Bob had the same thing. It was a sign."

Bob nodded enthusiastically. "It's true. I counted them myself. It's long been established that if there is a higher concentration of blue pieces than red pieces in both bowls of cereal than the message is for you. It's as simple as that."

My eyes widened slightly. Have I used the word ludicrous yet? Well, this whole thing was ludicrous.

"The colours don't lie," Ray said.

"They don't," Bob agreed.

I nodded slowly. "I've got to go," I said. I nodded to them both and walked out the door.

"Wait, Gerard!" Ray called. "Don't you want to know what the message was?"

I stopped and sighed. "Fine," I muttered. "What is it?"

"Do you want to tell him?" Ray asked Bob.

Bob shook his head. "No, it's your message. You tell him."

Ray drew himself up to his full height. "The message," he said dramatically. "Nobody said loving him was going to be easy."

I almost fell over. Normally, I would ask myself whether they were being serious but I knew straight away that they were. They were being dead serious. "What?" I gasped.

"Nobody said loving him was going to be easy," Ray repeated.

"Who told you that? Tell me," I insisted when they exchanged glances.

"It was the cereal, Gerard," claimed Ray.

"No, it fucking was not!" I cried. "Bowls of cereal do not give you messages like that!" This was fucking insane. Normally I was tolerant – really tolerant, in fact – of Ray's stupid cereal messages. But this just pushed me over the edge. Bob and Ray have been judgemental of Frank's and my relationship from the start. I can't believe they think I was stupid enough to believe that the cereal was giving me messages. This whole cereal thing was just a way for them to disguise their real

opinions.

“It was too!” defended Ray, waving his arms angrily.

“You’re fucking crazy,” I sniped.

“You’re not exactly sane either, Gerard! At least I don’t have imaginary friends,” Ray added.

Bob stepped between us and pushed us away from each other. “Who cares where the message came from,” he interjected calmly. “What matters is what the message said, right?” He looked between the two of us. “*Right*?”

My head was throbbing, the inside of my cheek was stinging and my wrist and knuckles were aching. I really did not want to be here, arguing over some stupid message. I already felt horrendously bad over what I had said to Frank; I didn’t need lectures on ‘loving him’ from two of the craziest people in this place. But I also didn’t need to make any more enemies. Ray might tell Frank what I had said and then it was over. Even more over than it is now.

“Sorry,” I muttered. I was sorry. It’s not exactly nice to call someone crazy – even if they are.

I looked around Ray’s room. I’ve been in here before; several times, if I remember correctly. It’s an…odd place. Odd is really the only way to describe it. I noticed that he’d moved his bed into the middle of the room again. He used to do that a lot and the orderlies were always fighting him to keep it in the corner. He did stop for a little while but it seems he’d started again. I didn’t quite understand why he had to sleep in the centre of the room. I’m not sure, but I’ve got a suspicion that it has something to do with some message he got on his very first day.

Ray’s room is always very dark. Even though the lights are on, it’s still very creepy and gloomy. There is a large black sheet over his window which eliminates a lot of light. I once asked him why he kept his room in darkness all the time. He told me that is was because, “the messages he interprets from the light against the wall are always bad.”

I smiled to myself as I recalled that conversation. That was probably the very first conversation we ever had. That was when I realised I was still the only sane person in this place. That was when I resigned myself to the loneliness. When Frank arrived I thought that maybe everything was going to change. Yet, I managed to screw up every

single chance I had with him. I think my life was better when I kept my mouth shut. Maybe it's time to stop talking again. Hmmm.

"Let's talk about the real issue here," Bob began and turned to me. "Why are you walking away from Frank? Why are you giving up?"

I frowned. I did not come here to be reprimanded. "He doesn't like me anymore," I defended.

Bob and Ray exchanged smirks. "I know you're actually a very smart man, so I'm going to let that slide," Ray said graciously.

"He needs someone to fight for him," Bob informed me.

"You need to fight for him," confirmed Ray.

That made me feel a little stupid and irritated. "Why should I fight for him when he won't fight for me?" I asked.

"He needs someone to fight for *him*. He's the one who's all broken and hurt. You're just lonely. He's *broken*, Gerard. He needs someone to put him back together. He needs someone to fight for him. He needs to know he's loved." Ray kept repeating that phrase over and over again.

Fight for him.

Was that what I was supposed to do? Should I stop accepting his constant rejections and just tell him how I feel? Does that mean I'd have to admit that I loved him? I can barely say the word in my own head; how can I possible tell that to his face?

I didn't get a chance to hear anything else Ray and Bob had to say because Markman found me. "Let's go," she ordered, pointing to the corridor. I obeyed and left the room without saying a further word to either of my advice givers. I accepted the icepack from Markman and followed her. "Where are we going?" I asked.

"Hospital."

My eyes widened. "But I'm fine," I claimed. I was fine.

"It's just a precaution. I just want to get some tests done."

"Scans?" I guessed.

"Yes."

“To look at my brain tumour?” I asked. I still wasn’t convinced that I didn’t have one. Beside, I’d rather have a brain tumour than have brain damage like she claimed.

Markman looked sideways at me and half-smiled. “If you say so.”

Fight for him.

We were almost at the locked glass doors that lead into the main foyer. Once you were through this door, the world was open to you. I could see the outside already. I hadn’t been out of this place for a while and I was looking forward to the change of scenery. Markman swiped her card and typed the access code in so swiftly I missed it. All I saw her hit was the ‘enter’ button. The light went green and the lock made a soft clunking noise as it was deactivated.

“Wait,” I blurted just as I took a step through the door.

Fight for him.

“I’ll be right back,” I promised and thrust the ice pack into Markman’s hand before turning and running back towards the west wing.

Fight for him. Ray was right. No one ever said that loving him was going to be easy. This time I knew exactly what I was going to say. I was going to fight.

If All Is Not Lost, Where Is It?

I slowed down to a walk and unconsciously smoothed down my shirt as I approached Frank's room. I wanted to bang my fist on the door and kick it open to show Frank how crazy he made me. But I didn't. Of course I didn't. I just knocked lightly and waited. I wondered if Frank knew it was me at the door and was ignoring me. I would ignore me too.

Eventually, I opened the door and peered in. The huge speech I had planned in my head died. Frank was asleep. How very anticlimactic. I sighed and took a step closer. Frank was curled up in the middle of his bed, his blankets strewn around him. He looked ill. There was only one word for it. His arms were wrapped around his stomach and his hair was plastered to his forehead with sweat, even though it was fairly cool in his room. I wondered if it had anything to do with what Bert and I had said. I'd heard of emotional problems manifesting as physical problems. Had I made Frank like this?

Fuck.

My stomach ached and all I wanted was to lie down next to him and hold him in my arms. I just wanted to fix it. I hated how useless I felt. Despite my overwhelming desires to hug him, I didn't move any closer. I didn't want to wake him. I stood for a minute staring at him, my guilt over what I had said earlier eating me inside. I hated myself so much.

Eventually, I remembered that Markman was waiting for me so I retreated regretfully from his room and shut the door again. On my way back to Markman I swung past the rec room where I found Ray and Bob playing poker. I caught a glimpse of Ray's hand. He had three sixes. Not a bad hand. They both gave me their attention as I approached them.

"I think there's something wrong with Frank," I told them. "I think he's sick. Could you check on him later? He's asleep at the moment."

Ray looked very concerned. "Of course," he said. He glanced at Bob. "Told you there was something wrong with him this morning."

Bob nodded serenely. "We will take care of him," he promised.

I thanked them both and left. My worry hadn't lessened any but there was nothing I could do. I sighed and returned to Markman.

I was surprised to see Markman still waiting for me at the glass door. I had expected her to come looking for me. It appeared that she *had* trusted me when I said I would be right back. I never thought I'd ever use that word to describe our relationship.

"What were you doing?" she asked as I casually walked back up to her.

"Trying to fix things," I replied cryptically.

"Oh." Markman nodded knowingly. I swear she can read my mind.

I was slightly annoyed that I hadn't gotten to say what I wanted to Frank. I didn't get to tell him how I would fight for him. Now I know what I had been planning to say to Frank wasn't especially poetic. It wasn't quotable. It wasn't going to go down in history as the greatest love declaration of all time. But I think it was going to mean something to him. I'll tell him tonight when I get back from this stupid, unnecessary trip. I hated that I was being torn away before I had a chance to fix things. What if Frank woke up still hating me? What if it was too late to fix things tonight?

Fuck me.

I huffed loudly as I followed Markman to the waiting car. It was a fucking sweet looking car, by the way. I have no idea what type of car it is; all I know it that I wanted it for my own. I have no clue how to drive but how hard can it be?

As I settled into the leather seat I noticed for the first time in a while that my face was aching again. The entire left side of my face was throbbing horribly. This has been a bad day.

In one day I have discovered three things: I'm being spied on, I am useless in a fist fight and I'm also useless at maintaining any type of adult romantic relationship. And now, when I get back to the facility, I'm going to have to worry about what Frank is going to do. I really, really, sincerely hope he's forgiven me. It was really nice to kiss him. What I wouldn't give to do it again. I would give up this car. Even though it's not mine, I'd still give it up.

It seemed that they were expecting us at the hospital. As we made our way inside we were joined by two men in black suits. One walked

briskly in front of us and the other tailed us. I had never seen either of them before in my life. I had no clue what the fuck they were doing. It seemed they were some kind of security escort. That thought made me furious. It wasn't like I was going to run away or anything. I knew Markman didn't really trust me.

Actually, they do seem a little bit familiar. I'd seen suit people like them once or twice back at Bluestone. Shit, was I really that likely to run away?

This is a bad fucking day.

My mood was even blacker by the time we reached the Radiography department. I sulked all the way through the scan. I did, however, do everything the stupid machine told me to do. When it told me to inhale and hold my breath I did. When it told me to exhale and breath normally, I did that too. I didn't really want to screw anything up. I hated this place and I wanted to go home.

Ha, isn't it ridiculously pathetic to consider your home a mental institution?

After the scan I was ordered to sit on one of the waiting room chairs outside the room. There were seven doctors, including Markman, all crowded around the light box pointing at my scan and arguing with each other about something. It amused me for a little while but then I felt very self-conscious. I remembered my apparent brain damage and wondered if that was what they were getting excited about. Holy fuck! Maybe they found a brain tumour instead! I knew I had one.

One of the suit men was standing several metres away. He was standing very tall and rigid, like he was at an army training camp or something and a trainer was shouting in his face. He was also staring intently down the corridor. I couldn't discern what he was staring at though. Something about that wall at the end of the corridor was mighty interesting to him. I noticed that he had an earpiece in his ear. The cord ran down his neck and into the collar of his pressed white shirt. Interesting.

I tried to get his attention. "So, what are you? FBI?" I enquired.

No response.

I tried again. "CIA?"

Nothing.

I thought for a bit. “Secret Service?”

The suit man’s eyes flicked to me for a brief second before he continued staring at nothing. My eyes grew wide. “Holy shit!” I exclaimed. “Secret Service? Is the President here?!”

The suit man glanced back at me. “No, Sir,” he said curtly.

My excitement died down. “What a shame,” I said. “I’d really like to meet the President.”

The suit man turned to stare at me, an intense look of bewilderment on his face. I was equally as confused. I didn’t understand why he was looking at me in that way. What was so strange about wanting to meet the President?

“What did I say?” I asked defensively.

“Jesus Christ.” The man shook his head in what I assumed was disbelief and resumed his intense staring down the corridor.

I glowered at him. I was so sick of people keeping secrets from me. Now even complete strangers were keeping secrets. I stomped over to him and stood directly in his line of vision. “What?!” I demanded.

“Nothing, Sir.”

I made a very loud noise of disgust and stomped away from him and into the bathroom. I shut and locked the door and slid down the wall until I was crouched on the floor. A small knot of worry was forming in my stomach. I was very afraid that something in my scan wasn’t right. Markman never took this long. There have also never been seven doctors arguing over it before. I lamented for a couple more minutes before making the bad decision to check out my face in the mirror.

My beautiful face was broken. The bruising was coming out already around my left eye and cheek and it made me look like a monster. There were also several small cuts and abrasions that I hadn’t noticed previously. My split lip was also worse than I had thought. I gingerly touched the black skin around my eye and winced at the pain. The only good thing was that it wasn’t very swollen. Thank God, I didn’t need to look like a puffer fish as well.

This is a really, really terrible day. I wanted it to end already.

I wet my hands under the tap and tried to wipe away some of the dried blood the nurses had missed. It hurt too much to touch my face so I stopped. I scrunched up the piece of paper towel I used to dry my hands and threw it in the bin. As I watched the towel land in the black bin I noticed a newspaper folded in half and tucked down the side. My eyes lit up in disbelief. We weren't allowed to read newspapers in the institution and I was always dying to know what was going on in the outside world. I extracted the paper and spread it out on the bathroom floor. The first thing that caught my eye was the headline on the front page.

It read: **Ballato To Defend First Son**

Under the headline was a picture of Lindsey, my scary lawyer. The picture took up the entire front page. She looked pretty serious in the photo. She was standing next to some other man that looked remotely familiar. I quickly flicked to the next page to see if the story continued. I had no idea what the story was about but just as I was about to start reading Markman knocked on the door and called to me. Stricken, I glanced up.

"Just a second," I called. I would be dead meat if Markman caught me reading a newspaper. I tore the first page out and tucked it deep into my jeans pocket. I shoved the paper back into the bin and covered it with the paper towel. No one will ever know.

I opened the door and faced Markman. She handed me the hospital gown you were required to wear when undergoing scans. "Can you please put this back on," she requested, her voice strained.

I knew why. "More scans?" I said. Something was definitely wrong.

"More scans," she confirmed quietly and left me to it.

That was the closest I'd ever seen Markman come to crying.

***

It was dinnertime when we got back to Bluestone. Markman had not said anything to me since the bathroom encounter. The knot in my stomach was tightening painfully with every minute of silence that elapsed between us in the car. She couldn't even look at me. It made me feel like crying. I was literally sick with worry.

I knew something bad was in my head. It wasn't just my paranoia. It

was real.

Markman didn't even take the time to walk me back inside. She ordered one of the suit men to take me back to the foyer and sign me in. Relieved to be back home, I wandered to the cafeteria. Not because I was hungry, but because I knew that's where everybody was. I grabbed a bowl of soup out of habit and sat down slowly at my table. Everyone was staring at me. Of course they were – I was the fucking idiot who got pummelled in the fight this morning.

I forced two spoonfuls of the lukewarm green mush down my throat before giving up. Frank was nowhere to be found in the cafeteria. I did see Bob and Ray, however, and made the decision to go over and sit with them. I'd never sat at another table before. It felt weird and alien. I was only sitting with them because I needed an update on Frank.

"Good evening, Gerard," Bob said.

"How's Frank?" I ignored the pleasantries. I wasn't comfortable sitting at this table. I wanted to leave.

"You were right," Ray said.

Naturally, Ray, I'm always right. I know things.

"Frank's sick."

I knew it. "Is he okay, though?"

"He's not dying, if that's what you mean?"

I frowned at Ray. It is not funny to joke about death. Not at all. Not when you've killed someone yourself. It's not funny at all.

I left the table without saying thank you. I was worried about Frank. I'd never had a proper friend before who I worried about. Even though, technically speaking, Frank and I weren't friends at the moment, I still felt obligated to worry about him. I went to my room and lay down. My head was still throbbing and all I wanted was to close my eyes and end this day. I debated with myself for a minute about whether I should go and find Frank but I fell asleep before I made a decision.

I awoke four hours later due to the incredible pain that radiated from the left side of face. Fuck you, Bert. I hope I broke your jaw. If I

didn't, I'd be happy to try again.

I lay in the darkness for a long time with my eyes shut, hoping I would fall back to sleep. I couldn't decide whether I should get up and find the orderly on duty and beg for some painkillers. I wanted to, but then I didn't want anyone to know that I couldn't handle the pain. I could only imagine the pain and shame that Frank copes with everyday. This was nothing.

Another hour passed and I couldn't stand it anymore. I made my way to my door and opened it, blinking at the bright lights. That's strange, there aren't usually this many lights on at this time of the night. I had barely been standing in my doorway for two minutes when Ben came marching down the corridor carrying towels and a bucket. He looked surprised to see me.

"What's up?" he asked.

This is why I liked Ben. Anyone else would have sent me back to bed. At least Ben was going to give me a chance to plead my case.

"I can't sleep," I said and unconsciously touched my bruised face.

"Oh, of course. Dr. Markman did prescribe you some painkillers. Would you like some?"

I nodded; I could feel the relief already.

"I'm busy at the moment so you'll have to wait a few minutes, okay?" Ben marched off again without waiting for my answer.

It was 2:15am, what could Ben possibly be doing?

I'm a nosy person. I liked to know everything that happens in this God-forsaken place. It's the only way I get through the day sometimes. I began wandering in the direction that I'd seen Ben coming from. As I rounded the corner I noticed the bathroom lights were on and Frank's door was open. My stomach twisted painfully and I hastened my steps to the bathroom. I peered around the door and saw Frank crouched on the ground, throwing up into a bucket. He didn't see me and I didn't announce my presence just yet. He was dressed only in a pair of black boxers and a plain black shirt. It was the most leg I'd ever seen from him, besides that whole shower incident. From where I was I could see his clothes and hair were plastered to his skin from sweat. He was obviously fighting a fever. I remained in the doorway and continued to watch him throw up until all he could do was dry-retch. I was just

about to walk in when Ben nudged me. I glanced at him reluctantly and he looked annoyed. He pointed towards my room, obviously ordering me to go back to it.

Does he really think I would leave Frank here alone? Not a chance.

I noticed the bottle of water and fresh face towels in his hands. I took them off him and walked over to Frank. I crouched down next to him apprehensively and handed him the bottle of water.

Frank reluctantly accepted it and took several large gulps.

“I don’t want you here,” he said and set the water down, clutching his stomach.

“I’m not leaving.” Not a chance, buddy.

Frank glanced sideways at me and gave me a defiant stare. He was about to say something when his hand flew up to his mouth in panic. He reached for the bucket but was too slow and the water he had just swallowed came back up into his hands and all over his front. I snatched the bucket up and held it for him, feeling incredibly sorry for him. I quickly wet a few of the towels in the sink and waited until Frank was finished retching into the bucket. I silently handed a towel to him and he wiped off his hands. With another towel I gently reached out and started wiping his face. He went very still as I did but he didn’t stop me. He just stared at me as I helped to clean him up. I starting dabbing down his front with the towel but stopped just before I reached his lap. We both swallowed loudly and I quickly handed the towel over. Frank took it, his cheeks going bright red. Well, even more red, considering how flushed he was from the fever.

“I don’t like you seeing me like this,” he whispered.

I pointed to my face. “I’m not much better.”

A tiny smile appeared as he concentrated on wiping down his shirt. I quickly glanced to the doorway and was glad to see that Ben was gone. I gathered up all my courage and reached out, brushing Frank’s cheek with the backs of my fingers. Frank didn’t flinch or move away.

“You really don’t see how beautiful you are, do you?”

I meant it. I had never believed in anything more in my life. But still, Frank pushed my hand away and shifted away from me. I didn’t understand why he didn’t get it.

"Frank," I implored.

"I don't see it, Gerard," he whispered wretchedly. "You don't understand."

"What don't I understand?" I asked.

Frank glanced to door but it was still empty. He leant in closer and whispered, "I don't deserve it."

"Bullshit," I said, keeping my voice low.

Frank just shook his head and turned away from me, resting his tired head on his hands. We sat in an awkward silence, and I knew that Frank wanted me to leave. But I wasn't going to. I was going to let him know that I was here to stay. I wanted him to know that I wasn't going to abandon him or give up on him like everybody else had. I was going to prove that I wasn't going to *use* him.

"I'm going to fight for you," I said.

Frank didn't react but I knew he had heard what I had just said. I sighed softly and changed the subject. "Are you upset about what Bert said?"

"No."

"You're a terrible liar," I told him.

"I'm not lying. You shouldn't be upset when somebody tells you the truth about something" he replied listlessly, still not making eye contact with me.

"What?!" I exclaimed, outraged. "Bert is full of shit."

"No, he's not. It's true. I'm dirty. He sees it. It's not just in my head. I can't get clean. I can't."

Frank clenched his fists and screwed up his face, trying to contain the anger. Oh what I wouldn't give to reach out and just hold him in my arms. I knew that no matter how many times I tried to alleviate his self-torture I was going to fail.

"I hate them!" he exploded and struck the tiles on the floor in anger with his clenched fists. He was literally shaking now; his small frame was becoming consumed from the combination of self-loathing and hatred for those bastards. "I hate everybody." He turned to me. "I hate

you!"

I met his furious gaze. "Why?" I asked, hurt. "Tell me why?"

"I hate you for making me feel like this," he told me, his anger dropping a notch.

"Like what?" I pressed. I leant forward, desperate for him to tell me.

Frank clutched his soaked T-shirt. "This," he confessed.

I shook my head, at a loss.

"Like *this*," Frank repeated desperately. The anger that had burst out of him only moments before had disappeared.

I didn't move or speak as Frank searched frantically for the word in his head. I wished I had stayed in my bed. This boy is going to be the death of me.

"*This*," Frank muttered to himself.

I knew what he was trying to say. "Alive," I provided and Frank's head snapped up.

"Yes!" he exclaimed. "How did you know?"

I shrugged, not wishing to disclose the fact that I'd read his intern's paper.

Frank shuffled forward and grabbed my hands. "I don't know what it is about you. But you make me feel alive," he said. "You're like a drug. You make me forget. I look at you and I don't see them. I see you. You're like a drug," he repeated. "My special drug. I don't care what you did, Gerard. I don't care," he insisted and reached up to touch my bruised face. "I'm so sorry. Please forgive me, Gerard."

It appeared Frank was on some kind of emotional rollercoaster and was saying everything that was coming into his mind. I didn't dare say anything to him; I was too afraid I would say the wrong thing. I just wanted to hold him. He was barely a foot away. I could hold him. I wanted to hold him. I needed him.

Frank abruptly pulled away whilst I was mustering up the courage to reach out for him. My heart sunk from the bitter disappointment.

"I'm tired," he said faintly and stood up. He walked out of the

bathroom leaving me sitting stupidly on the floor.

I *hated* feeling like this. I felt like a fucking teenage girl with a stupid crush on a celebrity. It was consuming me. I couldn't take the rejection any more. I just wanted things to go back to the way they were. For the sake of the little sanity I had, I needed Frank back.

I left the bathroom and headed back to my room. I lay down on top of the covers; my face throbbing rhythmically.

I hated my life.

I didn't leave my room to go to breakfast until after 8am. I didn't want to face the world. I hated the world and everybody in it, including myself.

But except Frank…of course.

Zach came over to me with my meds. He watched me put the pills in my mouth and take a swig of water. But then he left and I spat them out. I'm not fucking crazy. I don't need to take these fucking anti-crazy pills. I hid the sodden tablets in my napkin and shoved them into my pocket. I'd been doing this for a while now and nothing bad had happened to me. I didn't feel any different not taking the meds so I felt justified in spitting them out every morning.

No one needed to know.

I had just begun eating my cereal again when Frank appeared from nowhere holding a tray of food. I almost choked in surprise as he sat down opposite me. I didn't understand what we were anymore. Were we friends or not? I mean, last night he did say he hated me, just moments before he told me I was his "drug." Frank pushed the tray to the side and wrapped his arms around himself. I quickly swallowed my mouthful and waited, hoping he would speak first.

"I'm sorry about last night," he murmured, not making any eye contact.

I nodded even though he wasn't looking at me. I took another mouthful of cereal to avoid saying anything. Oh God, could this finally be the moment when things work out for me? I decided that maybe I should apologise for saying that shit about kissing and telling.

I gripped my spoon tightly as I prepared to speak. I was nervous that Frank had forgotten what I had said and all I was going to do was

remind him. “I’m sorry for what I said,” I said quietly. “Yesterday. And all the other times.”

As soon as the word “sorry” left my mouth Frank began shaking his head. “I don’t care about that,” he said, a new bleakness apparent in his voice. “It doesn’t matter. I don’t know why I acted like it mattered. It doesn’t matter.”

He still hadn’t looked at me yet. I’m sure my face was scaring him off. I hadn’t had a chance to check out my bruises yet this morning and didn’t know how disgusting they looked. Still fucking hurts like a bitch. Fucking Bert. I swear if he shows up in here again and even *looks* at me I’ll knock his teeth out. I will. I’ll fucking mess him up. Nobody makes a fool out of me.

Frank and I lapsed back into silence and I began eating my breakfast again. It was the most disgusting cereal in existence; I don’t know why I chose it. I didn’t even know why I was eating. It hurt to move my jaw and that cut inside my mouth stung if anything came into contact with it. I wondered how long it would take the staff to notice that I’d stopped eating. Maybe I should start a protest. No eating until I get some answers about my head. If there was anything wrong with my head it would be a disaster. I have secrets that are pivotal to the *survival of the human race* in there. Literally. My secrets are not being adequately protected if I have brain damage like Markman alleged. Well, something must be wrong because she was pretty upset about something in there yesterday.

I decided to stop thinking about what had happened yesterday and focused my attention back on Frank. I was *just* going to ask him how he was feeling when he looked up at me for a brief second. Then as soon as that brief second was done, he averted his eyes and frowned at something behind me. I turned and looked.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck.

It was too late for me to leave. I *should* have known she was coming. I know things. She is the material representation of my doom. I *should’ve* known.

I quickly turned back around and waited. Ashamedly I was hoping she would just walk right past me.

But she didn't.

Of course not.

I'm not that lucky.

"Hi, Gerard," Lindsey said and sat down. She glanced at my face. "Whoa, that's an impressive shiner," she commented.

She did sound genuinely impressed. It made me feel quite proud. I wished I could see what Bert looked like this morning. I wished she could see what Bert looked like this morning. Then she'd be impressed. I may have only had the opportunity to hit him once, but I packed a lot of rage into that punch. It's no good punching someone if you don't make it count.

Lindsey produced a large folder from her oversized handbag and set it down on the table. "Now, Gerard, I need to go over some things with you before the others get here."

My mouth went dry. "What others?" I demanded immediately.

Lindsey glanced awkwardly at Frank then looked at me. "Some gentlemen wish to conduct an interview with you," she said quietly. "I asked the doctor to inform you."

"Markman doesn't tell me shit," I snapped and folded my arms crossly.

Lindsey pursed her lips but didn't comment. I glanced at Frank and he was watching Lindsey and myself very intently. I noticed he was biting his bottom lip quite fiercely, as if he was afraid of something.

"Shall we begin?" Lindsey asked and stared pointedly at Frank, dismissing him.

Frank and I exchanged a look. It was just like old times. Us against everyone else. God, I'd missed it. "Frank stays," I said firmly.

Frank smiled into his lap. Not a full smile. It wasn't an expression of his happiness. It wasn't even directed at me, but I'll take what I can get. I'd meant when I had said I was going to fight for him. Lindsey didn't seem too perturbed by what I had said. She just shrugged and opened the folder. She pulled out a piece of paper which I saw was

covered in hand-writing.

“Okay, Gerard. I’m going to –,” Lindsey began.

I decided to interrupt her before she got too far into her spiel. “What is this about anyway?”

She looked strangely uneasy. “Just some questions,” she said.

Frank and I exchanged another look. “Questions about what?” I pressed.

She hesitated in her answering, something that made me incredibly irritated. I hated that nobody around here told me anything. One day I’m going to fucking explode. Or even better, I’ll escape. Fuck, I’m looking forward to that day. It didn’t matter that I didn’t have any money. I’m pretty sure I’d figure something out.

“Your health,” Lindsey eventually replied.

That made my stomach ache. Maybe there really is something wrong with my head. I didn’t know what I was going to do if this whole brain damage thing turned out to be true. I didn’t know what it meant for the validity of my secrets. Fuck. I rested my forehead on the palm of my hand tiredly. I was extremely exhausted from lack of sleep and from the constant worrying about Frank. I was forever worrying about him. I know he suffered *every single day*. I know he was deeply scarred and incredibly depressed. I was afraid he would do something stupid. And if he did something stupid I would also do something stupid. And I promised myself I would never do that. Fuck.

I think the ‘others’ Lindsey was talking about arrived early because when Lindsey saw them walk in through the visitors entrance she swore. She did. Truly. She said, “fuck,” and threw all the papers back into the folder and slid them back into her bag. “I’ll be back,” she promised and marched over to the exit.

Frank and I both watched her leave; I was utterly disconcerted about the whole deal. I know Frank was feeling the same way; it was evident on his face.

“Do you think this is about, you know, Michael?” Frank whispered.

Hearing that name made me feel physically ill. It felt like someone was kicking me in the stomach relentlessly. The dread just weighed down on me, crushing my heart. I nodded regretfully. Of course it was

about Michael. She was a fucking cutthroat lawyer. You needed someone like that when you've *killed* someone.

Frank looked extra worried now. He kept turning around and trying to get a good look at Lindsey and the others. I liked that he cared so much. It made me feel slightly less ill. I desperately hoped they hadn't come to arrest me. I hoped they had come purely to ask me questions, as Lindsey had said. I can handle questions.

After about 5 minutes Lindsey began to make her way back over to Frank and I. Alarmed, Frank reached out and clasped my hand. "Come and find me," he ordered. "As soon as you're done, come and find me."

I nodded. It was at this moment that I knew that Frank and I were friends again. Right now. Frank was worried about me. It meant he cared.

"You need to come with me now, Gerard," Lindsey asked. I withdrew my hand from Frank's grip and stood up unhappily. Here I go to my doom. I followed Lindsey out of the cafeteria and into one of the visiting rooms. There were already three men in the room who all studied me intensely as I entered. A split second after I saw the three men I noticed the camera trained on the lone seat behind the table.

Fuck no. This is fucking stupid. I will refuse to do the interview or interrogation or whatever *the fuck* it is. This is an invasion of my privacy. There are already cameras in the fucking ceiling!

"Take a seat, Gerard," one the men asked, indicating to the lone chair. I didn't like him. His moustache was annoying me. It looked ridiculous.

I sat down tentatively and glared at all three men in turn – moustache man, stupid tie man and annoyingly good-looking man. I have a strong feeling this is going to be a disaster.

"Shall we begin?" Moustache man, who I assumed was the person running this show, said.

"No," I muttered, louder than I had intended.

The moustache man ignored my wishes. "Can you tell me who you are?"

What the fuck? He had said my name about 120 seconds ago. He

knew who I was. I glanced to Lindsey and expressed my annoyance. She frowned and nodded, telling me to answer the question.

“Gerard,” I said.

“Gerard who?”

I opened my mouth but no answer came out. I hesitated for a second. Gerard who? Gerard…..fuck. Fuck. *Fuck*. I don’t know. How do I not know my last name? Why don’t I know that? Oh God, there is something wrong with my head. Gerard…..? Gerard what? Panic began to rise in my chest. I glanced between the three men who were all still studying me with great interest. I swallowed.

“Gerard?” the moustache man prompted.

I shook my head and wiped my sweaty palms on my jeans. I turned to Lindsey and hoped to God she could help me. “I don’t know,” I whispered. I don’t know why I whispered. Everyone could hear what I was saying. “I don’t know,” I repeated, slightly panicky.

“Perhaps we should move on,” Lindsey said smoothly.

Moustache man frowned. “How old are you, Gerard?”

I knew that one. “Nineteen.” The fact that I was able to answer the question calmed me down. My heart rate dropped slightly.

“Good. What did you have for breakfast yesterday?”

“Um, cereal.” What kind of a question is that?

“What’s your mother’s name?”

I blinked. I didn’t know. I couldn’t even think of what my mother *looked* like. I wiped my increasingly sweaty palms on my jeans again. I didn’t want to admit that I didn’t know. I looked to Lindsey again, desperate for her to rescue me. She looked extremely worried and concerned. I shook my head at her again. “I don’t know,” I hissed.

“What’s your father look like?”

My voice actually trembled as I replied, “I don’t know.”

The three men all exchanged looks. They thought I was faking. I wasn’t fucking faking! I don’t know! Alright? Are you happy?

“What was your pet’s name?”

“I don’t know.”

Where were you born?”

“I…don’t know?”

“What was your favourite movie as a child?”

I didn’t even bother replying. I don’t know. I can’t remember. The panic began to rise again. The three men even began to argue. I wasn’t listening to what they were saying. I was too scared. My brain was failing. My brilliant brain was broken. My memory was gone. *They* must’ve stolen it. I can only remember events that date back to less than three years ago. All my memories are of being in this place. It must’ve been *them*. That time when they cut open my head. I thought I had managed to escape with everything – all my secrets – intact. *They* hadn’t tried to steal my secrets, no, that wasn’t their intention. *They* had stolen my memories. Everything. All gone.

“Oh, God,” I choked out. I stood up, knocking the chair over backwards behind me. “I need to leave.”

The stupid tie man stood up with me. “Sit back down,” he ordered. I did. Immediately. I was afraid.

Lindsey seemed to explode. “How dare you speak to my client like that,” she raged at stupid tie man.

“This is a Federal Investigation!” he raged back. “I am a Federal Agent. You will not speak to me like that!”

“I will speak to you in whatever manner I deem fit,” Lindsey snapped.

The good-looking man joined in the argument. That was when I tuned out. I couldn’t do it anymore. He had said this was a federal investigation. That was bad. I didn’t want to go to prison. I couldn’t. I would get eaten alive. I don’t know why I killed Michael but I know I didn’t mean it. I thought about trying to explain that to the moustache man. Would I be announcing my own guilty verdict if I admitted it?

I felt like crying. I really did. Ever since yesterday when I discovered there was something wrong with me. I know that crying is weakness and there was no way I was going to cry in front of these bastards. But it all just hurt so much. The constant debilitating guilt over what I had

done, the stress over Frank, the fact I had no memories and now the fear that these men had come to take me away. I pushed myself away from the desk and stood up. I was leaving.

No, I wasn't. The moustache man ordered me to sit back down. What the hell was with all the ordering today? "Fuck off," I spat at him but he was unperturbed. I threw myself back into the chair and rested my head in my hands. I shut my eyes and tried to calm myself down.

"Look at him," Lindsey exclaimed. I assumed she was talking about me. "He is not fit to be exposed to such circumstances. You are harming the health of my client."

"Your client is fine," tie man said arrogantly.

No I'm not! I'm a fucking wreck. I was feeling physically ill again and nauseous. I really hope I don't throw up.

"Gerard," Lindsey said, "don't answer any more questions, alright? Don't say another word."

"You cannot tell your client that!" tie man shot back. "I have a court order to gauge the mental state of the accused."

I could only hear what was going on but I knew there were a lot of angry gestures. But as soon as tie man said the word 'accused' I knew I was in trouble. I'd actually been charged with a crime. I *was* going to prison.

"Do not call him that!" Lindsey sounded extraordinarily angry. "He is just a boy."

"No, he is a murderer, Ballato!"

My head snapped up and I stared at the tie man in horror. Silence descended on the room. It was a terrible, bone-chilling silence. Everyone knew that last sentence should not have been said. My eyes filled with tears but I hastily wiped them away.

"I'm sorry," I choked out, the panic and fear clenching around my throat like a pair of hands. "I…I didn't mean…. I didn't. It was an – an – an accident. I'm…."

Lindsey shot to my side. "Shhhhh!" she hissed, drowning out my feeble apologies.

The realisation seemed to strike all three men at the same time. “You remember!” Handsome man accused, brandishing his finger at me fiercely.

I shook my head but it was too late. All three of them were exchanging gleeful looks with each other. Things suddenly began to move very quickly from that moment. Moustache man snatched up the camera and shoved it back into the bag. Handsome man made a comment about why he always voted Republican and tie man just studied my petrified face. Barely five minutes after my confession they were ready to leave. “See you in court, Ballato,” the tie man said smugly and all three men exited the room.

I turned to Lindsey. “I don’t want to go to prison,” I said.

She shook her head. “You won’t go to prison,” she replied.

“Then where?”

“Greenwood,” she said shortly and looked away.

Fuck that. There was only one thing to do.

I didn’t realise I had been walking towards Frank’s room until I was standing in front of his door. I didn’t even remember how I managed to leave the interview room. I slipped inside Frank’s room and shut the door. I wasn’t going to cry. I felt like it, but I refused to. I was supposed to be the strong one. You can’t have two broken people in a relationship.

As soon as Frank saw my face he himself went pale. He knew it was bad. He knew what I had done. He walked over to me and silently wrapped his arms around me, burying his head in my chest. I wrapped my arms around him, never wanting to let him go.

I was going to get out of this place. I was going to run away. There was no way I was going to let them take me away. I was going to escape.

“Come with me,” I breathed to Frank.

He looked up at me. “Where?”

“Away from here.”

Frank pressed his face back into my chest. “Okay,” he said, his voice

muffled.

I was going to escape.

And Frank was coming with me.

You Don't Get Mood Swings From Eating Cornflakes

"You seem unusually happy today, Gerard," Markman commented, leaning forward to rest her elbows on the desk.

I froze and assessed my facial features. Was I smiling? I must be. It was an accident though, an oversight. I never intentionally smiled. Well, at least I didn't in front of Markman. Frank was an exception. I hastily dropped the corners of my lips back down to form a scowl, which I wasted no time in directing at Markman.

Markman wasn't fazed by my scowl. She knew she had caught me in an unguarded moment. My only hope was that she didn't deduce my intentions to escape from my smiling. It might sound like a bit of a stretch to put those things together but I'd underestimated Markman once before and paid for it dearly.

"Are you planning something?" she joked.

I knew it was a joke, but that didn't prevent me from feeling uneasy. She had ways.

I knew I would betray myself if I stayed in this room any longer. "May I leave?" I requested. It had only been fifteen minutes of my allotted forty.

"No."

Fuck. I think I may have made her even more suspicious by asking to leave. "Fine," I said sulkily.

Markman studied me, suspicious. I put on my innocent face. She was staring at me a little too intensely for my liking. I avoided looking away to ensure I didn't raise her suspicions even more. She knew something was up. Jesus Christ, woman! Get out of my head! I narrowed my eyes at her. *If you can hear me, look away now*. I said the line once in my head and just as I completed it Markman sat back and broke my eye contact.

Aw, fucking shit. That was a coincidence, right?

“I hate to break this to you, Gerard, but you’re almost a month behind on your blood tests.”

A single drop of sweat began to trickle down the side of my face. I was intensely aware of its trek from my brow to my shirt collar.

“No.”

“No?” Markman seemed surprised. Was she being serious? I mean, had she really expected me to say, “why, yes, of course,” and roll up my sleeve? Bitch.

“No!” I exclaimed, crossing my arms tightly across my chest to protect my veins.

She tried to reason with me. “Gerard, please don’t be difficult.”

I was being difficult? Seriously!? What the fuck? She wanted to force slivers of metal through my skin and into my veins and *then* she wanted to siphon out god knows how much blood. No! It wasn’t going to happen. No.

Markman sighed. “This isn’t negotiable. We can do it now or we can do it later, but it has to be done today.”

“Next week?” Ha, if everything went to plan I wouldn’t even be here next week.

“No,” she said firmly; my heart sunk.

I was scrambling now. “Tomorrow!” I insisted.

“No.”

“Fucking stupid,” I muttered angrily under my breath.

“Watch your mouth,” she snapped.

I glanced up, surprised. Markman had never raised her voice to me like that before, especially not because of my swearing. Something was up. “What’s your problem?” I asked.

Markman wasn’t impressed. Well, she was never impressed with me to begin with. She was always disappointed or unhappy with me. I could never do anything right, and when I did do something right it was met with intense scrutiny and surprise. It was pretty fucking annoying.

Markman never answered my question. We descended into silence again. That had been happening a lot lately. It was almost as if Markman couldn't think of anything to say to me. It wasn't just our usual silence either; our old silence was tinged with the annoyance and exasperation we had for each other. This new silence was different; it was like Markman was guilty. She was guilty because she knew I was in trouble and she knew that there was nothing she could do about it. We hadn't talked about any of it. Neither of us had mentioned the fucking interrogation I got last week or what I had said in it. We hadn't even talked about what I had done.

I sighed rather exaggeratedly and tucked my arms in tighter to my chest. Markman was a crafty woman. I wouldn't be surprised if she produced a needle from thin air and stuck me with it while I was distracted. I know she would. I know things.

To break the annoying silence I decided to raise the issue about the new cook and the quality of food he was producing. I looked up. "The new cook is trying to poison us," I said.

Markman wasn't impressed, again. Didn't I just say she was never impressed with me? "No, he's not," she said bluntly without even looking up from her note writing.

"Um, yeah, he is!" I insisted. "Have you tried his chicken soup? It's fucking disgusting. I'm surprised no one has *died* yet."

Markman tried to hide her smile. She was unsuccessful. I saw it. "What do you want me to do about it, Gerard?" she asked.

"Get the old lady back."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because."

I rolled my eyes. I liked my chicken soup. No, scratch that. I *loved* my chicken soup. The old cook made *the best* chicken soup I'd ever tasted. But then she left, and we got this fucking joke of a cook who was one pot away from giving the entire facility food poisoning.

"I'm telling you, it tastes like toxic waste."

"No, it doesn't. Don't be such a drama queen." Markman had

abandoned her note taking to continue the conversation.

A terrible thought just crossed my mind. What if he was trying to kill us? For real? What if he was trying to kill *me*? Holy fucking shit. What if *they* sent him to infiltrate the facility and poison me so they can break in and take me out? All it would take was one poisoned bowl of food to render me unconscious so *they* could come and cut out my secrets. Fuck me.

I was suddenly very afraid. Luckily I hadn't eaten yet this morning. Good thing too: he could've slipped rat poison into my scrambled eggs for all I know.

"Gerard, what are you thinking about?" Markman reverted back to her favourite shrink line.

I wondered if I should tell her. Maybe she could help me if I did. Or maybe she'd call me crazy and try to convince me otherwise.

"I can't help you if you don't tell me."

I inhaled sharply. I would tell her. I would ask her. If anyone knew what was going on in here it was Markman. "Is there any chance that the new chef is evil?" Shit, that didn't come out right. Evil was the wrong word.

"What?" I think Markman was thoroughly confused.

I struggled to find the right word. I shifted through my vocabulary but nothing stuck out. I sighed and tried to explain myself. "I meant…the cook, there's no chance he would be trying to poison me, is there?"

After all this time I still didn't understand why Markman was still so shocked by the things I said. My latest accusation seemed to render her speechless. It certainly wasn't very professional that's for sure.

"How do you come up with these things?" Markman asked after composing herself. She rubbed her eyes tiredly and looked at me expectantly.

I felt incredibly embarrassed. It did actually sound rather absurd; though not impossible. I shrugged and looked away. I didn't want to talk about it anymore. Markman didn't let it slide. She pressed me for more details.

"Why do you think anyone would try to harm you, Gerard?"

I stared at the ground, my eyes wandering over the ugly pattern on the carpet. I swear, if I ever got carpet in my house it would be pattern-less and one plain colour, like blue. None of the multicoloured shit I've been seeing around. Actually, maybe I'd get tiles.

"Gerard." Fuck, she was persistent today. This is the last time I'm telling her anything. You'd think I'd just admitted to kill the President or something.

I huffed and took a moment to stretch my arms. They were getting pretty cramped tucked up to my chest.

"Why do you think the cook is trying to harm you?" Markman asked the question again and I'm sure it was just in case I'd forgotten. She'd only just asked me the fucking question; I don't forget things *that* quickly.

"Just a thought," I muttered.

Markman surveyed me closely. "Do you think that maybe this has something to do with *them*?" she said tentatively. She didn't like bringing *them* up. It was almost as if she thought I'd go nuts at their mention. She was right though, fucking psychic. I narrowed my eyes at her. *Cough if you can hear me.*

She didn't cough. She didn't do anything. I considered the situation. Maybe she was covering for herself. If she could read my mind she wouldn't exactly come out and tell me. I'd have to find another way to trap her.

"Please don't ignore me," Markman said as she flipped open my file and began to write.

I scowled again. I was doing a hell of a lot of scowling today. It wasn't my fault that I went off on random thought processes in my head. It was just the way my brain worked. It was a remarkable brain, so I wasn't going to question the random thoughts that shot through it. They had to have some meaning or relevance.

"I don't know. Maybe," I said evasively. I didn't want to talk about *them* right now. *They* scared the fucking shit out of me so I avoiding thinking about *them* as much as humanly possible. I wasn't convinced that it was *them* trying to infiltrate the institution anyway. *They* were extremely intelligent. *They* wouldn't bother trying to poison me. *They* would force their way into my brain with brute force. In fact, I was sure they'd actually prefer to have me conscious so they could hear

me scream as they cut open my brain.

A cold shiver shot up my back at the thought. That's why I did not think about *them* very often.

"No," I corrected myself. "I don't think it's them. It's too simple, too amateurish."

"Gerard, *no one* is trying to poison you. I promise you."

Another possible explanation appeared in my head. What if that cook was here to seek revenge on me?! What if he knew one of the people I'd killed? What if he was here to punish me for what I'd done? God knows how many people died by my hand. I was a murderer, but I wasn't rotting in jail like I should be. Maybe he was done waiting for the American justice system to punish me so he took matters into his own hand. It made sense. He *was* trying to kill me.

I clapped my hand over my mouth as I realised that I'd eaten his lasagne last night. Actually, now that I think about it, I was feeling pretty sick in the stomach after my dinner last night. The poison would have seeped into my blood stream by now. Who knows how much more poison I'd consumed over the past month after eating his food. I could be at a near lethal dosage by now. Oh god. I wondered if it was too late to try to throw up.

Markman stood up, alarmed. "Gerard, what's the matter?" she asked urgently.

I was freaking out, and I must have looked like I was as well because Markman was rather concerned.

"What if he's punishing me?" I said horrified.

Markman moved around her desk and leant down next to me. "Who is punishing you?"

"The cook!"

"Why would he want to punish you?"

"Because I killed them!" I yelled and buried my head in my hands.

After that I waited desperately for Markman to tell me I hadn't killed them. I waited for her to tell me that I didn't have to worry about being punished because I hadn't done anything wrong. But she didn't.

I was guilty.

Markman squeezed my shoulder comfortingly. “Gerard, no one is trying to punish you. No one is trying to poison you either. You’re being paranoid; it’s a symptom of your illness, remember? We’ve been over this before. No one is trying to hurt you. You *are* safe, I promise.”

I didn’t want to be here anymore. I needed to find Frank and tell him. He would believe me. He wouldn’t make me feel like I’m crazy. He certainly wouldn’t tell me I was being paranoid. “Can I leave now, please?”

Markman straightened up. She nodded regrettably and I quickly hurried out.

I walked briskly towards the cafeteria. I assumed that Frank would be there. It was still very early but Frank liked to get up early and have breakfast while the cafeteria was still relatively empty. Normally we went to breakfast together but this morning I had a ridiculously early appointment with Markman so he had headed off on his own. I arrived at the cafeteria and scanned the tables looking for Frank. Strangely though, he wasn’t there. I spotted Ray and Bob and decided to ask them if they knew where Frank had gone.

They had a single page of newspaper laid out in front of them and they were arguing about something on the page. As I got closer I realised that the piece of newspaper had a large chunk ripped out of the corner. How odd. Now that I was closer I could hear what Bob and Ray were arguing about.

“I *told you* she wasn’t dead,” Ray said smugly and tapped the paper.

Bob was obviously annoyed. “How was I supposed to know? I made a reasonable assumption based on the facts provided.”

Ray saw me standing by the table and grinned. “See, Gerard, I told you they couldn’t kill the Phantom’s wife.”

What. The. Fuck? I raised an eyebrow. Ray pushed the piece of newspaper forward and I realised it was a page of comics. I immediately recognised Calvin and Hobbes and Garfield. “That’s great, Ray,” I said unenthusiastically. Ray had been obsessed with The Phantom comic strip for just over a month now since Ben had begun giving him the comics page every Sunday. He regularly updated me

on what was happening to the guy. I listened, but only because I usually had nothing better to do.

“Have you seen Frank?” I asked, changing the subject.

A black look covered Ray’s face. “Yeah,” he said bitterly. “He *was* here, and then he freaked out about something and tore out half of the newspaper. Then he left. He tore out Spiderman! Now I’ll never know what happens to Ruby,” Ray finished, his voice surprisingly anguished.

“Where did he go?” I asked. Both Ray and Bob shrugged. “Thanks,” I muttered and walked away towards Frank’s room. I didn’t like the sound of what Ray had said. ‘Freaked out about something’ didn’t sound good at all. Hopefully Frank was okay. Maybe he saw the lottery numbers or something and realised he’d just won a million dollars. I don’t know.

I knocked lightly three times on Frank’s door and waited. No sound came from within his room so I opened the door. I peered inside but it was empty. That’s odd. I couldn’t really think of anywhere else he would go. I shut his door and stood in the corridor for a moment, thinking hard. I glanced at the bathroom door and noticed it wasn’t closed properly.

Fuck.

I quietly opened the door and slipped inside. As I walked through the dressing rooms I could hear a single shower running. It confused me because Frank hadn’t felt the urge to have a morning shower for several months now. As I rounded the corner my heart sunk. He was so damaged. Maybe there was no way to fix him.

He was sitting with his knees tucked up to his chest and his arms wrapped around his legs. His head was resting on his knees and he was sitting under the fierce spray of the shower. He was fully clothed and soaked to the skin. Afraid, I ran over to him and almost slipped on the numerous puddles that had formed on the ugly tiles. I reached the shower taps and wrenched them off. My jeans got wet as the spray sputtered and died; the water was fucking freezing. What the fuck was it with Frank and freezing cold water? Frank raised his head and I could tell he had been crying.

Oh god.

“Come on,” I murmured and pulled Frank to his feet. The shower was

eerily quiet without the gushing of water. Now the only sound I could hear was Frank's choked breathing and the gurgling of the drain as it swallowed up the water. Frank let me walk him back to the changing rooms. I had my arm wrapped his waist and his arm around my neck. I set him down on one of benches and grabbed a towel off the stack against the wall. I had just finished wrapping it around Frank's shoulders when the door opened and Ben came in.

"Gerard, what are you –," he began. "Is he okay?" Ben hurried over to Frank and looked him over, surprisingly concerned.

"I just found him," I said quietly and gazed down at Frank. Frank was staring at the floor, his body shaking violently from the cold.

"I'll get the doctor," Ben told me, and left.

I sat down next to Frank and gently tipped his face up to look at me. As he was looking at me a drop of water fell from his fringe and ran down his forehead and onto his eyelashes. I reached out and brushed the hair off his forehead affectionately.

"Tell me," I whispered.

Frank's eyes flicked over my shoulder as Ben returned surprisingly quickly with Markman and Zach. Markman took one look at Frank and said, "someone get Frank some dry clothes, please."

She leant down next to Frank. "Frank, you need to put on some new clothes," she said, very softly and kindly. I don't think I've seen her be so…nice. "Someone can help you, if you want?"

Frank looked straight at me as soon as she finished the question. Markman glanced at me too but didn't make a comment.

"Come on," I said and he stood up. I accepted the dry clothes and a new towel off Zach and led Frank to the closest changing room. I shut the door but there were no locks. I reached out for the hem of Frank's shirt. He obediently lifted his arms up as I pulled the wet shirt off his head. I threw it to the ground and it landed with a splat. I handed Frank the new towel and he wrapped it around his bare shoulders. I crouched down and started undoing his shoelaces. I pulled his shoes off and then removed his socks. I pushed them to the side.

"I'm sorry, Gerard," Frank whispered.

I stopped and shook my head. "Don't be sorry. You don't have

anything to be sorry about." He just sighed. I stood up and turned my gaze down to his jeans. I hesitated in reaching out for them. "Can I?" I asked.

He nodded without hesitation. I popped the button on his jeans and slid the fly down. My heart was thumping surprisingly hard as I did it too. The whole situation was completely non-sexual but I was still nervous. I'd seen Frank naked once before but it wasn't this close. He didn't seem fazed at all as I pulled his jeans and boxers down, exposing him. I forced myself not to look. He didn't need that right now.

His jeans were so wet and soggy that they were damn near impossible to pull off over his knees and feet. Eventually though, they ended up on the floor with his shirt. Frank wrapped the towel around his waist as soon as his feet were free. I picked the dry clothes up off the floor and handed them one at a time to Frank who clumsily began to dress himself. His body was still damp and it was surprising hard to get the dry jeans on. It took the combined effort of both of us to slide them up over his slender, white thighs and fasten them around his hips.

I took a step back when I was done and realised that he was still shaking slightly from the chill. I took my jacket off and held it out for him to slip into. It was a little big but he looked adorable in it. Frank took a step forward and hugged me briefly before pushing open the door and walking out. Markman was still waiting. She said something to Frank and he nodded. She placed a hand on his back and guided him towards the door. Just as he was walking out he shot a fleeting look back at me which broke my heart.

I still didn't know what had upset Frank so much in the first place. It was frustrating to have to wait until Markman was done. Just once I wished that friends trumped highly trained psychiatrists. I wandered out of the showers and into Frank's room. I knew he wouldn't mind if I lay down on his bed for a little while. I would wait for him here. Then I would make him tell me what had happened.

I lay down on top of Frank's unmade bed and shut my eyes. I was pretty tired; I did get up ridiculously early for that session with Markman. I dozed off almost instantly, thinking about how I could fix Frank.

Frank crawling up onto the bed roused me from my nap. To my complete surprise he lay next to me and curled up against my body, setting his head down on my shoulder. I instinctively wrapped my arm

around him and pulled him in closer. He didn't speak and he looked thoroughly miserable.

It hurt me to see him like this. Every pained look made me feel sicker and sicker in the stomach. I just wanted to make him better. "What happened?" I asked.

Frank didn't reply. I glanced down at him and saw that he had his eyes clenched shut. I didn't ask him again. I didn't have the heart too. As I waited for him to tell me I started thinking about my escape plan. At this precise moment it was pretty much non-existent. It was harder than I thought to get out of this place without being detected. Of course we could 'take care' of whoever was on duty but I felt sick at the very thought of hurting someone, even someone as annoying as Ben or Zach.

"What are you thinking about?" Frank said and absently traced a pattern on my chest with his finger.

I looked down at him. "You."

He smiled coyly. "Liar."

I smiled back at him and shook my head. I don't think I went a minute without thinking about Frank. "You scared me," I confessed and Frank looked away ashamed. "Please tell me what happened."

Frank sat up and reached down for something down the side of the mattress. He handed me a scrap of newspaper and then folded himself into a little ball with his head buried in his lap. I glanced at the newspaper tentatively. I flipped it over and half-smiled when I saw Ray's Spiderman comic on the other side. I turned it back over to the other side and read the headline. The dread that flooded me was almost unbearable. I felt ill.

Thirteen-Year-Old Boy Raped, Beaten.

"Frank…." I was horrified. "What is this?"

"Look at the picture," he cried, his voice saturated with fear and pain. A single tear slid down his cheek.

I skipped over the text and stared at the two hand drawn police sketches at the bottom of the article. I didn't recognise them, but Frank obviously did. "Frank, is that them?" I already knew the answer.

Frank burst into tears. “Yes,” he sobbed. “They’re here. Oh, God, Gerard.”

I hastily sat up and reached out for him. He folded easily into my arms and I wrapped them around him securely. I think I knew what he meant. In the article it said that the boy had been assaulted on the south side of Princeton. Bluestone was located on the north side of Princeton. Frank’s rapists were here, in Princeton, and Frank was terrified. His terror was so tangible it was rubbing off on me.

Frank’s tears were falling thick and fast. “They said – he said – oh God, Gerard, I can’t. No. Please. No. I can’t. Not again.” His words were a slurred, jumbled mess. I think he realised I could barely understand him because he took a few deep breaths and tried again. “He said – oh God, he was right. Gerard, they’ve come back for me.”

“What?” That was the last thing I had expected him to say.

Frank let out a few more sobs. “He said, ‘see you next time.’ I can’t do it again, Gerard. Please don’t let them. Not again. Oh, God, it hurts so much. No. No. No. Please. No. Oh, help me, please, *Gerard*.”

I clutched Frank tightly, grabbing a hold of his shirt desperately. My words were stolen before I could speak them. I didn’t know what to do. I shut my eyes and concentrated on pulling Frank in tighter and tighter. I could feel his nails digging into my back but the pain seemed almost superficial compared to the pain radiating from Frank and falling from his eyes. His entire body was shuddering as he sobbed into my shirt.

“I won’t let them,” I said. “I’ll never let them hurt you. Never.”

I wondered if Frank was right. Did they really know that Frank was here or was it just a coincidence?

“Do you hear me?” I said, speaking loudly over Frank’s sobs. He went quiet for a moment. “You are safe. No one will *ever* touch you again. Do you understand? I’ll never let them get you. I’m here to protect you. They will never hurt you. *No one* will ever hurt you again. *Do you hear me?!* ” I yelled and shook Frank. My emotions were going to get the better of me.

With his head still pressed up against my chest Frank nodded once, twice. I exhaled and slid my hand up his back. I stroked the back of Frank’s head and ran my fingers through his hair. “I’ll never let them hurt you,” I said softly and shut my eyes, listening to him weeping

softly.

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Frank's eyes were still red and his face was still slightly blotchy when we sat down at our table in the cafeteria. He stared down at his sandwich like it was crawling with maggots. I stared down at my own sandwich. I wasn't going to eat it. I was ridiculously hungry, but I wasn't going to put it anywhere near my mouth. I still wasn't convinced about the cook's innocence. For all I know he could've stuffed the bread with arsenic.

"You not hungry either?" Frank asked when he noticed I had pushed my food to the side.

I shrugged. I wondered if I should tell Frank about my suspicions. It was pretty likely that he'll laugh, tell me to stop being silly and just eat the damn thing. I didn't really want him to do that; it would hurt my feelings. But I didn't exactly want to lie to him either.

"What's the matter?"

Busted.

"Gerard, *what's the matter?* " Frank wasn't giving up.

I glanced over at the counter to make sure the cook wasn't attempting to listen to me. You know, just in case he was evil. I leant in towards Frank and he mimicked me so we were almost touching heads. "I'm worried that new cook is trying to poison me," I whispered and glanced uneasily at the offending piece of food.

Frank didn't comment. He just blinked several times, his face unreadable. As I watched him his eyes dropped down to my discarded sandwich. Before I could react he reached out for it and took a huge bite from the middle. I gasped and held my breath. I was seriously expecting Frank to fall over dead. But he didn't; he just chewed the bread and peanut butter thoughtfully before swallowing it.

"Nope, it's fine," he announced and placed the half-eaten sandwich back on my tray. It didn't look all that tasty anymore. I watched Frank carefully in case he fainted or went green but he didn't. He seemed fine. Dammit. I was wrong…again. I was never wrong before. However, the results were rather inconclusive. The cook may not have poisoned this particular meal; I still wasn't convinced.

Frank sighed. “Gerard, no one is trying to poison you.”

“You sound like Markman,” I grumbled.

“Markman is right,” he said. He said it without any hint of sarcasm or surprise.

I pouted and dropped my eyes to the tray. Frank tutted. “Well, you won’t have to worry about it for much longer, right?”

“Huh?” I honestly didn’t know what he was referring to.

Frank looked at me funny. He leant in. “We’re still escaping, right?”

That shocked me. I’d assumed that the whole ‘rapists are in town looking for me’ thing meant he didn’t want to leave the safety of the institution.

“Right?” Frank seemed a little frantic.

I blinked at him. “You want to leave? I thought….”

Frank’s face had gone very white. “We can’t stay here,” he said, his words heavy and emphasised. “They’re going to take you away. They want to take you away from me. You promised you would protect me. How are you going to do that if you’re in jail, Gerard?” Frank’s voice was laced with fear.

I nodded fervently. “I won’t let them hurt you. I’ll find a way. I promise.”

Frank wrapped his arms around his abdomen tightly. I had no idea how I was going to get us both out of this place without being detected. A couple of nights ago I had snuck out of my room and tried to get through the glass door but the code had been changed since I’d passed through it all those months ago. Unless I could figure out the code in the next 24 hours I would have to find another way. I wasn’t even considering the visitors entrance. The only way to get in or out via that door is if you were buzzed through by a staff member at the reception. The staff entrance was also impossible to get through. The staff door could only be opened after the person swiped their ID card and keyed in the correct code. Considering I had neither the code nor a valid ID card I was screwed.

I thought Bluestone was meant to be a minimum-security facility. Yet, it was damn near impossible to get out. Even if, somehow, Frank and I

managed to escape the building, there was still the pressing issue of the fenced perimeter and the possibility of patrolling guards. I thought it was insane that a small, minimum-security mental facility had patrolling guards. It was like they were trying to prevent us from getting out, or someone from getting in.

I was so caught up in my futile planning attempts that I didn't notice a slip of paper flutter down onto my tray. Frank was the one who noticed it and picked it up. He raised an eyebrow at me and opened it. I glanced around and saw Bob and Ray hurrying away. Frank and I exchanged a look. It was a look that quite plainly said: 'oh please, what now?'

Frank cleared his throat and read out the note. "Meet us at Percy at 3:30pm sharp. Make sure you are not followed. X."

"X?" I repeated and chuckled.

Frank grinned, a welcome facial expression after this morning. He glanced at his watch. "12:50," he told me.

I didn't have time for this. I had many more important things to do today. Despite telling myself this several times I found myself walking outside with Frank at 3:30. Bob and Ray were waiting for us at the severed tree stump that used to be known as Percy. Frank and I exchanged a pained look and walked over to them.

"Were you followed?" Ray demanded.

Frank and I both looked over our shoulders. There was no one behind us or even within a twenty-metre radius. Ray nodded, satisfied and told us to sit down. We both hesitated but Ray's fierce look forced us to our knees within three seconds.

"I hope you liked your piece of newspaper," Ray commented shrewdly to Frank.

Frank went red. "Sorry," he muttered. He knew how obsessed Ray was with his comics.

"I want it back," Ray said bluntly.

Frank turned to me and took a deep breath. "I don't have it, Ray," he said, displeased.

Ray threw his hands up in frustration. "Well, now I'll never know

what happens to Ruby!"

"Is that why you wanted us here?!" I said angrily. I had so many better things I could be doing. We did not need to be interrogated about the whereabouts of a fucking comic. I didn't understand why Ray liked Spiderman that much.

Bob held up his hands. "No, it's not," he said and shot a calming look at Ray. "We have something we need to share with you."

Ray frowned at Bob. "But I need to know!"

I made a loud noise of infuriation from my throat. "She slips off the ledge and falls the twenty stories but Spiderman catches her just as she's about to hit the ground." Why the fuck did I know that?

Ray's eyes grew wide. He grinned triumphantly. "I knew he wouldn't let her die!"

Bob smiled at me and patted Ray on the knee. "Can we tell them now?" he asked.

I was only mildly interested at this point. I don't know if there was anything that they could say to me at the moment that would change anything.

"We want to help you escape."

My mouth dropped. How the *fuck* did they know about that?! This was bad. The more people who knew about what we were planning to do meant the more likely we were to get busted. I looked to Frank. He was equally as horrified. We both turned to look at Ray and Bob. I was so close to hitting Ray in the face. I was convinced that he must've been spying on me or at least listening in to my conversations.

"We're not escaping," I lied. I had to try and convince them otherwise.

Bob and Ray both laughed. "It's okay!" Bob said. "We won't tell anyone. We want to help you."

Oh, *great.*

Frank shot me a worried look. He knew that this could only end badly. He may not have known Ray as long as I had but he knew enough to know that Ray was incredibly unstable. I started thinking about how I could bribe Ray and Bob into forgetting we even had this

conversation. I picked unconsciously at the grass and twirled it between my fingers.

“Gerard,” Bob said firmly.

I glanced up. “What?”

“Don’t do that.” He nodded at the shredded grass between my fingers.

Oh, that’s right. I dropped the grass and rolled my eyes.

Ray cleared his throat. “Shall I tell you what happened?” He didn’t wait for my answer, he just barrelled on. “Well, it was a while ago, Gerard, you might remember?”

I doubt it.

“Remember?! I asked you if you were planning to escape?”

Holy shit, he was right. Fuck me.

“But you said no?”

Well, I wasn’t, at the time.

“Anyway, it turns out that my cereal *was* accurate, it was just wrong about the time. Gerard, my cereal predicted that this would happen!”

“Should I be clapping or something?” I said sarcastically.

He ignored me. “I was so disappointed at the time that I decided to swear off eating cornflakes. I was so sick of them being wrong. But that’s the thing! They weren’t wrong! As soon as I realised this I knew that I had to have them again. And they told me *exactly* how you were going to escape.”

I cannot believe that we were talking about future predicting cornflakes.

“How?” Frank asked.

“Fire alarm,” Ray said knowingly.

I felt so incredibly stupid. I felt betrayed by my brain. *Of course!* The evacuation point for the institute was the staff car park. Once we were outside all Frank and I would have to do is slip away from the group and make a run for it. It was remarkably simple and I was frustrated

that I hadn't thought of it.

The hope on Frank's face was beautiful. It made me want to kiss him. He turned to me. "Will that work?" he asked, his eyes lit up like the stars.

"It's brilliant," Ray interjected and looked between Frank and I.

I ignored him and addressed Frank. "It'll work," I said honestly. I was silently spewing that Ray had gotten one up on my brain. "But –."

"But what!?" Ray interrupted. "Gerard, *it'll work*. The only thing is… you'll need to leave tonight."

To my right, Frank nodded.

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My heart was beating at an anxious 110 beats per minute as I laid in the eerie darkness of my room. This was all moving too fast for my liking. After Ray announced that if we wanted to leave we needed to leave tonight everything seemed to move in double time. I'm not saying I didn't want to leave, I'm saying that I didn't want to get caught because the plan sucked or wasn't thought out properly. I had serious doubts. The window of opportunity was so miniscule it was almost non-existent. Fuck.

I flexed my left arm and winced. Despite my protests, straight after my meeting with Ray and Bob I was dragged in to have my blood test. Yes, it did help slightly that Frank was there but I still shook so much the nurse missed the vein and had to stab me two more times. I swear all the staff in this facility were incompetent.

The institute was so silent at night that I had been worrying needlessly about hearing my cue. I leapt to my feet at the sound of Ray's voice echoing down the corridor. I clutched the t-shirt in my hands tightly as I crept closer to the door. I heard the light thudding of shoes as the two orderlies on duty hurried to Ray's room. I took a deep breath and cracked my door open. I peered through the crack down the corridor. Upon seeing it was deserted I slipped out and shut my door noiselessly. I could still hear Ray carrying on and I knew that I had no time to waste. Ray could conjure drama out of anything and tonight he certainly did that.

I walked briskly down the corridor, away from Ray's room, and towards the cafeteria. It must've been a full moon tonight because the cafeteria was lit up brightly as I crossed. From the cafeteria I headed towards the corridor that was home to the only fire alarm. I was familiar with this corridor; it was where Markman's office was located. We weren't normally allowed down here unless we were seeing someone. I spotted the small glass box halfway down the corridor, next to a door labelled, 'Dr. Jared Leto. I drew up in front of the alarm and began to wrap the shirt around my fist. The instructions on the glass read, 'Break Glass In Case Of Fire'. That was exactly what I planned to do.

Just as I was about to punch the glass I heard a noise from down the corridor. I hesitated and glanced in the direction of the offending noise. I think Markman was just as surprised to see me as I was to see her. She froze halfway through locking her office door. She abandoned the door and began to walk towards me.

"Gerard," she said in a low voice. "What are you doing?"

I raised my fist again. I wouldn't let her stop me.

The moment she realised what I was going to do she stopped several metres away from me. "Gerard, you don't want to do that." She was ridiculously calm; I was sweating profusely and my heart was thumping loudly. She took a step closer but I moved my fist back menacingly. "You know very well that there are several individuals in here that will react very badly to the situation you are about to create."

That's what I wanted. We needed the chaos. Without the chaos we would be declared missing almost immediately. We needed cover.

"Gerard, tell me what you are thinking?" Markman asked and took another step closer. "Why do you want to do that?"

"Stop it!" I hissed and glanced nervously between Markman and the alarm.

Markman was staring at me very intensely. Fucking hell, I'm not about to kill anyone. "Gerard, why do you want to do that? Is it for attention?"

"Stop it!" I repeated. I didn't need her working her shrink abilities on me at this precise moment. My time was running out. I needed to pull the alarm or it would be game over.

“Gerard, you really won’t benefit from this. In fact, I would strongly advise against getting into any more trouble. Or….”

I clenched and unclenched my shirt-covered fist anxiously. That was it. “Don’t you understand?” I growled. “Did you *really* think I would just wait here for them to come and take me away?! I can’t just wait here. I know I did a bad thing and *I’m sorry* but I can’t leave him. He needs me. I said I would fix him, but I need more time. I can’t let them take me away from him.”

Saying Markman was surprised would be an understatement right now. “You’re doing this for Frank,” she clarified, softly.

“I *love* him,” I whispered wretchedly. It was the first time I’d ever admitted that to anyone. It was the first time I’d even said those three words out loud. Ugh, how pathetic.

With the words still on my tongue I turned and punched the glass as hard as I could. The glass shattered loudly and fell to the ground around my feet. I wrapped my shaking fingers around the red lever and pulled.

We're Not In Wonderland Anymore, Alice.

I think I may have slightly underestimated the consequences of my actions.

Okay, I may have *majorly* underestimated the consequences of my actions.

Oh well, I do that pretty often anyway.

I released the red lever and it sprung back to its original position with a soft thud. I took a moment to shake a few stray pieces of glass that had been stuck to my shirt onto the ground. When I was satisfied there was no more glass, I scrunched the shirt up into a ball and began making my way back to the cafeteria where I was meeting Frank. I could faintly hear screams and banging over the blaring of the alarm as the other patients panicked and broke out of their rooms.

A very, very tiny part of me actually believed that Markman would let me walk straight past her. That tiny part was obviously very wrong because she reached out and grabbed my arm tightly as soon as I was within reach. I halted next to her and took a deep breath.

“Let me go,” I said calmly. I would give her one chance to let me walk away before I used whatever force I deemed necessary to get away from her. I kept my eyes looking straight ahead down the corridor.

“You know I can’t just let you leave.”

I slowly turned my head to look at her. “Yes, you can.”

Markman looked strangely frantic. It was almost like she knew something bad had happened or was going to happen, which was strange because all I had done was pull the alarm, not set off a hydrogen bomb. Either way, it gave me a smug sense of satisfaction to know she wasn’t going to have a good night. “I can’t,” she repeated and started ferreting through her oversized handbag with her free hand looking for something.

I could feel time slipping away from me. Over the loud peals of the fire alarm I could hear the panicked voices of the other patients. I needed to meet Frank. I needed to get out of here. I snatched my arm away from Markman’s grip and didn’t feel any inclination to steady her as I yanked her off-balance.

“Gerard!” she exclaimed.

“Can’t?” I said quietly. “Or won’t?”

She didn’t answer. Or, maybe she couldn’t answer. Either way I didn’t care. “If I’m lucky,” I said spitefully, “this will be the last time we ever see each other.” I started walking away. I wondered if I could ever be so lucky. I had spent the past three years of my life around Markman. Three miserable years. Who knows what would’ve happened to me if I had never met Frank. Actually, wait, I do know: I’d still be miserable. Good fucking riddance.

“I’m sorry,” Markman called after me.

I froze. Now, those weren’t exactly unusual words to say to someone when parting ways but it was an odd thing for Markman to say to me. I don’t know if I recall Markman ever saying those words to me. I didn’t particularly want to turn around and look at her again but the curiosity was plaguing me already. I knew that if I didn’t ask her now it would eat at me for the rest of my life. Maybe she was apologising to me for sticking me in solitary confinement for fucking weeks? Or, maybe she was sorry for not believing me about *Them.*

“Sorry for what?” I said as I turned around. It had to be about *Them*. That’s the biggest thing she could ever possibly apologise for. She had to be apologising for not believing me and *trying* to make me think I was crazy.

Markman looked sad. That’s odd. What did she have to be sad about? I thought she would be happy to know she would never have to see me again. I sure would be if I was her. “I’m sorry for ruining your life,” she said. She actually sounded very sorry. How surprising. Though, that wasn’t the point. It was *what* she said that surprised me more.

I blinked three times waiting for it to sink in. Wait, Markman *ruined* my life? When? How? Did she do it literally or figuratively speaking? I know she’s made my life pretty darn miserable but I wouldn’t go as far as to say she’s ruined it. Was there something *else* she wasn’t telling me?

“Wait!” I called out as Markman walked away from me. Why was *she* suddenly walking away from *me*? She wasn’t allowed to walk away from me! I was supposed to be walking away from *her*. It was meant to signify something. Fucking hell. “What do you mean?” I said and took a few hasty steps after her.

She didn't stop or reply much to my annoyance. Not that I really expected her to ever listen to me or do anything that would benefit me. I wanted to follow her so badly and demand answers but I knew I couldn't. Frank was waiting. I needed to go to Frank. I sighed exaggeratedly and headed back towards the cafeteria.

How did Markman ruin my life? Did it have something to do with my lack of memories? Did it have something to do with Michael and what I did? Maybe she killed Michael and let me take the blame?!

Okay, no, that's a stupid idea. She may be a bitch but she's not a murderer. But then again, either am I. Fuck. Fuck, yes I am. Fucking hell. Fuck Markman. In fact, fuck everyone. Except Frank. Although, I wouldn't exactly be opposed to fucking Frank. I don't really how…. Fuck, what is wrong with me? Why was I suddenly thinking with my cock when I have a brain like this?

The smugness I had felt around Markman returned as I saw the chaos I had created. I say chaos because that's the only word in my vocabulary that could possibly describe it. I paused as I entered the cafeteria to take it all in. It was quite obvious that fire and mental patients do not mix. Even though there wasn't a fire, even the prospect of one sent everyone into a panic. It probably didn't help that the fire alarm was incredibly loud and made it hard to think. Was it really necessary to have such a loud alarm? I was pretty sure something half the volume would work just as effectively.

I think what everyone found the most frightening was the fact that this is a secure facility and it is impossible to exit the building unassisted. It was pretty reasonable to be frightened when you think you're going to die because you know there is no way out. I glanced to my right and saw Adam trying to punch the glass out of one of the windows. I felt a pang of guilt as I realised he would probably break his hand trying. I hadn't wanted anyone to get hurt. I wasn't that sadistic. Maybe this was what Markman was so worried about?

Two people whose names I never bother learning were huddled under one of the cafeteria tables and two more had broken into the kitchen and were attempting to use the stainless steel pans to batter down the courtyard door. Hayley had her back pressed up to the wall and just stood there watching everything with wide, terrified eyes. Everyone else was running around like headless chickens. It was amusing for 3.2 seconds. Then it just became annoying and slightly alarming. I knew I was the only sane person in this hellhole.

I blocked everyone out and scanned the cafeteria for Frank. By my third scan I still hadn't seen him and was beginning to feel very uneasy. I hadn't seen Ray or Bob yet either. Maybe they were still at their rooms? I crossed the cafeteria and headed for the west wing, giving a frantic Bert a wide berth as I did. I frowned as I walked around him. I didn't know he had been released from solitary. When the fuck did that happen? Markman left me to rot in there for breaking into a secure area, yet beating someone up didn't seem to earn you more than a few days in solitary. Talk about unfair. Despite my raw anger at the way he had ruthlessly pummelled my face I avoided him. I couldn't deal with Bert and his Godzilla delusions at this exact moment. I would get him back though, another time.

I got halfway down the west wing corridor and realised that I hadn't passed anyone yet. My uneasy feeling grew into fear. What if Frank was stuck in his room? What if he had been hurt by the other crazies in here? I ground my teeth together angrily as I hurried down the corridor. I rounded the corner that lead to Frank's room and skidded to a halt.

In the middle of the corridor ahead of me was a guy pacing back and forth wielding a plank of wood like it was a Lightsaber. Where the fuck did he get a plank of wood?! I pushed that thought aside as I realised that he had Ben, Zach, Frank, Bob, Ray and several other people boxed into the end of the corridor.

"Back off! I said back off!" Lightsaber-guy screamed as Ben tried to approach him. I saw Frank retreat several paces as Lightsaber-guy swung the plank of wood menacingly at the group. "You'll never get my pillow!" he screeched at Ben. "This is all just a ploy to take my pillow! I'll never let you touch it! It'll never serve you!"

Pillow? Seriously? And Markman thinks *I'M* crazy?

Fucking hell. This was supposed to be easy! The fire alarm was supposed to go off and I was supposed to find Frank and then we were supposed to escape. I took a step forward but Ben discreetly held up his hand to stop me. I paused and realised that Lightsaber guy hadn't seen me yet. I could use this to my advantage. I crept up behind Lightsaber guy and lunged at him, sending him sprawling to the floor. I immediately bounced straight back onto my feet, fists raised and ready to fight. My eagerness to fight was unnecessary; Lightsaber guy was rolling around on the floor moaning like a fucking baby. Who's the Jedi now, bitch?

For some strange reason Ben and Zach seemed ridiculously happy to see me. Ben was looking at me like I was the fucking king or something. Zach looked me over anxiously. “Are you okay?” he asked worriedly.

“I’m fine,” I said slowly, confused. Now he was *treating* me like I was the king.

“Are you sure?” Zach asked. “You’re not hurt or anything?”

I frowned at him. “Why?”

“Are you sure you’re not hurt?” Zach asked me again, more frantically.

“Yes….”

Zach nodded and turned to Ben. “You stay with Gerard, I’ll go and start evacuating people.”

My mouth dropped. There was no fucking way I was going to escape when I had a babysitter. I shook my head violently. “No,” I objected.

Ben seemed equally annoyed. “No way, dude. You’ll need my help getting people out.”

“So, what do we do about Gerard?”

I felt like I had turned invisible. I couldn’t believe that they were actually arguing over who got to babysit me. This was a fucking nightmare. I wish I had turned Ray down. I wish I hadn’t pulled that lever. “I can look after myself,” I interjected.

Ben thought for a moment, ignoring me. “Give him to one of the security guards?” he suggested and bent down to pick up the plank of wood.

Zach seemed to like that idea. “All the guards have been security cleared, right?” Both Ben and Zach began walking towards the cafeteria and indicated for me to follow them. I did, very reluctantly.

Ben glanced back at me. “I assume so. Does it matter?” he whispered.

Zach sighed in frustration. “Yes! You can’t go and put him in the custody of some random uncleared security guard. What if he gets kidnapped?” Zach whispered that last line so softly that I *almost* missed it. Whoa, kidnapped? Seriously? I am not a fucking child.

My stomach twisted painfully and I glanced around for Frank. He was walking a fair distance behind me so I held out my arm, beckoning him to come to me. He ran to catch up and clung to me. I put my arm around him protectively whilst still trying to hear what Zach and Ben were saying. Who the fuck would possibly want to kidnap me? I wasn't anyone important.

Or, actually, maybe I was. That would explain a lot. Fuck.

Oh man, I had forgotten how perfectly Frank always seemed to mould into my body.

When we reached the cafeteria I think it was pretty safe to say that Ben and Zach forgot their debate over who should babysit me when they took in the scene. It was fucking crazy in this room. Bert had even amped up his theatrics, I noticed worriedly. I forced myself to be calm. I had a job to do. No, fuck that, I had a *mission.* I had to protect Frank and get him and myself out of this place. The outcome was not negotiable.

"Is this enough drama for you, Gerard?" Ray asked quietly coming to stand next to me.

"I didn't want anyone to get hurt," I murmured as Adam continued to hurl his fist at the window.

Ray shook his head slowly. "Too late now," he said. He was right. There was no way we could've known that it would be so dangerous and that everyone would react this way. I had pulled that lever and now I was going to get out of this place. Again, it was not negotiable.

Zach reappeared near our group. "I want you all to come with me now," he ordered and escorted us across the cafeteria and to an area of the facility I wasn't intimately familiar with. He hurried us all towards the staff entrance, fumbling with his lanyard and security pass as we arrived at the locked door. He slipped his security pass into the slot and I watched very intently as he entered the pin number, his fingers darting over the number pad with a sense of urgency.

Nine. Seven. One. Nine. Two.

I'll remember that.

The light on the door went green and unlocked. Zach pressed down on the metal handle and pushed. He held the door open and ushered us all through. I resisted the urge to take the lead. I wanted to avoid any

unnecessary suspicion that might arise from me being overly eager to get outside. I don't think I really needed to worry anyway; Zach was incredibly stressed and distracted. We walked along another short corridor which led to a set of double glass doors. Beyond the door I could see the car park. I could see freedom. Zach swiped his card again but did not enter a security code. The doors made an audible clicking noise and Zach opened them.

The cool night air rushed up against my face almost immediately and it was at that moment that I could *taste* the freedom. I glanced down at Frank and saw the hope in his eyes. This was going to happen and now he knew it would too. No longer was he going to have to rely on my hope and unrealistic expectations. He finally generated his own. He looked up at me and smiled.

He *smiled*.

I wanted to tell him I loved him. Right now. I wanted to scream it to him. I wanted to whisper it to him. I just wanted him to know that I loved him more than anything else in the world.

But I didn't.

Of course I didn't.

I put my arm around him instead in a lame attempt to shield him from the bite of the night air. I wish I had thought to bring my jacket. Frank had his, thankfully, and that was all that I really cared about.

I studied the car park. There were four cars parked in the darkness, sitting silently on the concrete. To the left of the door we had just exited there was a row of bushes and trees that lined the area. To the right was a high wall which I guessed was part of the wall that ran around the courtyard. I focused my attention on the bushes. I figured that if Frank and I slipped away to behind them we could use them for cover to make it to the set of automatic iron gates that guarded the entrance. They were our last real barrier to freedom. There was also a small guardhouse at the side of the entrance gates but I knew it would be empty.

"Shit." Zach's frustration caused me to turn around. He was standing by the door repeatedly flipping a lever up and down.

I watched him do this more several seconds before interjecting, "I think it's broken."

He glanced at me, then at the switch and then up at the floodlights that I presumed were connected to the switch. I was actually ridiculously pleased the lights were not working. It would be easier to slip away in the darkness. He threw the switch several more times before giving up. The only light emitted out into the car park came from a dull floodlight on the wall.

My attention was then diverted to the entrance gates. They made a painful screeching noise as they opened just wide enough to let an unknown man through. He made a lame attempt at pulling the two doors together again before giving up and casually walking over to the small group. I made a quick judgement and felt giddy with excitement when I realised that Frank and I could probably squeeze through the gap the guard had left when attempting to close the gate. Everything just seemed to be falling into place. It seemed too good to be true. As the man got closer I realised he was one of the security guards that patrolled the perimeter.

“What took you so long?” Zach snapped.

The guard shrugged. “I’m here aren’t I?”

Zach made an angry noise in his throat. “Just do your job,” he ordered. “Look after Gerard.”

Even though I didn’t see him do it, I knew the guard just rolled his eyes. Zach left again.

I casually began to move closer to the bushes. It wasn’t time to go yet. If the guard didn’t notice Frank and I had disappeared then Zach would surely notice when he returned with the next group of people. But, we had to be ready.

The guard looked around at the group. “Which one of you is Gerard?” he asked, eyeballing us each individually.

Wait, is he serious?

“Me.” Ray stepped forward holding his hand up high like he was being called upon by a teacher.

Oh Ray you fucking legend. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you a million times. I swear I’ll make it up to you one day. Cross my heart. I will never mock your cereal messages ever again.

The guard nodded. “Alright,” he said gruffly. “Sit over there where I

can keep an eye on you." Ray obediently took a seat on the step. The guard seemed to stop paying any attention to me or Frank after that, much to our delight. Frank was gripping my hand tightly as we slowly migrated closer towards the bushes.

"Now?" he whispered.

I shook my head. We needed to wait until Zach came back. We needed him to see us.

It seemed to take forever for Zach to return with a new lot of people. His sense of urgency seemed to have dispelled slightly, probably because he had realised that there was no fire. He was probably more interested now in who pulled the alarm that ruined his quiet night in the first place. I didn't just need to act innocent; I needed to ooze innocence from my pores. Zach was one of the only people in this place that could see through my bullshit.

Ben followed Zach out, holding a towel around Adam's hands. Fuck, Adam managed to actually draw blood? He sat Adam down next to Ray and talked to him quietly for a minute, reassuring him.

"Someone needs to stay out here," Ben said to Zach. We were pretty far away now and I had to strain my ears to hear what he said.

"I'll stay," Zach offered.

No. No. No. Fuck. We just missed our chance. I think Frank realised that too because he let go of my hand to hug himself.

"No, I'll stay." Markman walked up to Ben and Zach. Where the fuck did she come from?

My stomach churned from the disappointment and the dread. Ben and Zach headed back inside leaving Markman and the guard standing by the door. She hadn't looked around yet. She hadn't seen us by the bushes. For all she knew we were still inside. Maybe we should just leave now?

Yes. Go.

I grabbed Frank's hand and dragged him into the bushes. He made a soft noise of surprise but let me pull him down into the dirt behind some recently pruned shrubs.

"Now?" he said incredulously.

“Yes,” I said, peering through the leaves to see where Markman was. She was going to be the main obstacle. She knew what we were planning to do and I had no doubt that she would be extra vigilant. I knew that the reason she was staying outside was so she could watch me. No chance. I wasn’t going to let her stop me. I would do whatever it took.

“Gerard….”

Still in a crouched position I swivelled around on the soles of my shoes so I was facing Frank. “She knows.”

“She knows what?”

I took another look through the leaves. Markman was crouched by and talking to Adam. Adam was probably worried about being so exposed to the aliens and that they were planning to abduct him again. He barely ever went outside because he was afraid that he would be too easy to abduct. He once told me that it was harder to be taken when there was a roof. It made sense actually.

“She was there when I pulled the alarm. She knows what we’re planning to do.”

I couldn’t tell if Frank was angry at me or her. Probably me. “Why didn’t you say anything?” he hissed furiously. Even in the shadows I could see the devastation all over his face.

I steadied myself against the bushes with my hands. “Because it didn’t change anything. We are leaving here tonight whether she knows or not. I promise.”

Frank turned away from me. “Don’t promise things you can’t do,” he said softly. He had given up hope. No. Fucking hell.

Still speaking softly I said, “I *will* get us out of here.”

“To what good though?” Frank exclaimed and I hushed him urgently. “Even if we get out we’ll barely get a mile away before they catch up with us! Then they’ll be sure be separate us.” He stood up. “I can’t leave. I’m not going. Markman knows what we’re going to do. When they catch us they’ll take you away from me forever. I’d rather spend however long we have left together in here then ten minutes out there.”

“No,” I whispered wretchedly. He was breaking my heart. He was

making my chest ache.

“It’s *over*, Gerard, don’t you understand that? We can’t leave. Don’t you dare leave, Gerard, don’t you dare.”

“It’s not over,” I insisted. “I said I would do this. I *promised* you.”

I reached out for his hand but he withdrew it from my reach sadly and slipped out from behind the bushes back into the car park. The despair hit me like a tonne of bricks. I glanced out through the leaves, trying to decide what to do. I couldn’t leave – Frank very explicitly told me not to. I needed to talk to him. Come back, dammit.

I noticed that Markman had spotted Frank and had left her position near the doorway. She was walking straight towards him. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Frank was too busy brushing dirt off his clothes to notice her rapid approach. She intercepted him and smoothly guided him into the shadows of the building. What the fuck was she doing? Did she seriously think that Frank would tell her where I was? All I could make out was Markman leaning in conspiratorially close to Frank like she was a spy passing on a message. I didn’t know if they were speaking about me but I assumed they would be. My eyes widened as I saw her hand something, a package, to Frank. It was too dark for me to see what he did with it. I must remember to ask him what it was. The exchange of the package seemed to signify the end of their conversation because Markman took a step forward and glanced around, scoping the area. To my complete and utter surprise, as soon the guard was looking the other way she steered Frank out of the darkness and back towards the bushes. She was sending him back to me. That doesn’t make sense….

Markman shot one last look in my direction and walked back towards Adam and Ray like nothing had happened. I stood up as Frank practically ran over to me.

“Wha -,” I began to ask but Frank shushed me. He grabbed a hold of my hand and began to pull me towards the entrance gate. I almost tripped over in the haste. Frank dragged me back upright, his face flushed with excitement.

“Come on!” he said, his excitement tangible.

“What did she say to you? Frank? *What did she say?* ” I demanded.

Frank paused for a split second to say, “Run.”

“What?” What the fuck does that mean?

“She said run. So run, dammit, Gerard.”

Oh. Right. Because that makes a whole lot of fucking sense! Why was she telling us to run? Did she want us to leave? She had said less than half an hour ago that she couldn’t let me leave. What the fuck is her deal?

“Gerard!” Frank exclaimed and yanked on my arm to hurry me up.

“But -,” I tried to object again.

Frank growled and yanked me harder. I swear the boy was trying to remove my arm from its socket. “I’ll tell you later, ok? Just run for fuck’s sake.”

I made the ultimate decision to trust Frank and follow him. His mood seemed to have done a complete 180 in the space of about two minutes. One second he was giving up and the next he was rousing me into action. I desperately wanted to know what Markman had said to him and what she had given him. Something had changed from when she was holding my arm at the fire alarm to now. I was ridiculously curious and wondered if Frank knew. I will have to make him tell me.

My thinking must have caused me to slow down because I almost fell over as Frank violently jerked my arm to make me move faster. I decided to pay attention; I didn’t particularly want to scuff my jeans if I fell. We ran towards the gate, keeping low and using the bushes for cover. As we reached the end of the bushes I realised that the distance between the cover of the shrubs and the gate was three metres. We had to cross that gap without being seen by anyone back at the top of the car park. Fuck.

Before I could open my mouth to ask Frank what we should do he had shot out from behind the bushes and was squeezing through the gap the guard had left. Damn him and his impulsiveness. I much preferred to consider all the options in my brain and formulate a plan.

“Come on,” Frank hissed and beckoned me as he made it through. I glanced anxiously towards Zach and the others. What if they saw me? “Gerard!” Frank insisted from his safe spot on the other side of the perimeter.

I dashed out and crossed the three metres. I took a deep breath in to flatten my body as much as I could and started sliding through the

gap. I wasn't as small as Frank and the gate began to make noises as my body pushed against it. Sweat dripped down my forehead as I began to panic. If I pushed on this gate or widened it any more it would make the horrible screeching noise it made when the guard first opened it. One more inch and I was going to ruin everything.

"Don't worry about it!" Frank said urgently.

If you say so, Frank. I pushed the gate with my hands just wide enough so I could slip through, cringing at the noise it made. I really hoped I hadn't just alerted everyone's attention to the gate but there really was nothing else I could have done. I just had to hope that if Markman was, for some inexplicable reason, on our side she would give us enough time to get to the end of the road.

As soon as I made it through, Frank took a hold of my hand again and we sprinted down the road away from the facility. Well, Frank sprinted and I tried not to die as I struggled to keep up with him. I don't think I have moved this much or this fast in my entire life. I swear if this works I will try to get in shape.

I was falling so far behind that Frank's hand slipped from mine. He ran a couple more metres before turning around. I could see he was frustrated with me but he was nice enough not to say anything mean. "Come on," he encouraged. "Look, there's the car!"

Thank fuck for that.

There had actually been a good reason as to why Ray had insisted earlier in the day that we needed to leave tonight and not any other day. When we made the ultimate decision to pull the alarm and get ourselves evacuated from the facility, Ray organised for his brother to wait a half mile away from the facility and pick us up if we managed to get out. We had to leave as soon as we could because after tonight Ray's brother was leaving the state. We were really trusting Ray with our lives here. For all I knew, Ray's brother could be someone who likes to murder hitchhikers. However, If we didn't get murdered then I owed Ray a hell of a lot.

The headlights on the car flicked on as we approached it and the engine roared to life. I guess that was a good sign – he was actually expecting us and wasn't just some random serial killer. I glanced back the way we came from but there was no one in sight. Maybe Markman was covering for us? I don't believe it but it seems to be the only explanation at the moment as to why Zach and every other staff

member in the place wasn't chasing after us.

I spent the five seconds it took for me to reach the car talking myself into opening the door and getting inside. I have very well-established trust issues, as Brendon so politely pointed out in his essay. Why the fuck wouldn't I have trust issues when there are people out there looking for me so they can *hack into my brain*.

I froze as the thought crossed my mind.

Maybe this was a set up.

Maybe it wasn't Ray's brother in the car at all.

Maybe it was *them*?!

Fucking hell. I backed away.

Frank skidded to a halt by the car, his hand poised over the handle. "Gerard!" he exclaimed as my body practically immobilised itself.

I couldn't do it. I couldn't get into the car without knowing. I knew that Frank wouldn't intentionally put me in a position where *they* could harm me, but Ray…? Maybe this was his way of getting back at me for mocking him and being a general fuckhead towards him. If I got into that car I would die and Frank would die too.

Then the world would end.

This could have all been a set up. *They* could have recruited Ray into tricking me into leaving the facility. That could have been why we had to leave tonight and not any other night. *They* knew that once I was out of that place I had no where to run. I think I may have just walked into an ambush.

Frank was suddenly by my side but he didn't try to pull me towards the car. Did he know? Was I right? I'm always right. "Get in the car, Gerard," Frank begged me. *Begged*. I couldn't let him get into the car knowing he could die.

" – can't," I forced out. The fear was pounding in my ears and tightening in my chest.

He gave me a beseeching look. "What's *wrong*?"

"What if it's *them*?" Saying the words out loud seemed to make it real. I took a step backwards. I was going back.

Frank shot a look back at the car and for a moment I actually thought that he was going to come with me. He pointed to the car. “You are getting in that car, Gerard,” he ordered and started to push me towards it.

I dug in my heels. “No.”

“Yes,” he said stubbornly.

“You go,” I said. I didn’t want him to leave me. I think I would die if he got in that car without me.

He glanced behind me and threw up his hands. “Are you serious? I’m not going anywhere without you!”

Oh, thank fuck for that.

“I can’t let them get my secrets!” I hissed so the driver of the car wouldn’t hear me.

I didn’t understand the look that crossed Frank’s face. It was a look of…distress? Or something equally pained. I couldn’t be sure but he looked terrified. Terrified *for* me, or *of* me?

“Oh, Gerard,” he moaned agonisingly and covered his face with his hands.

We stood in silence for what felt like an hour but realistically it was only a few seconds. I tried to decide what to do. I wondered if I could keep walking and whether *they* would let me walk away from their ambush.

“Okay,” Frank rounded on me, determined. “This is how it’s going to be. We are going to count to five and then you’re going to take my hand and then you’re going to get in that car with me.”

I felt sick. “No, Frank,” I implored.

“Remember when you told me that you would never let anyone hurt me?”

I nodded meekly. Of course I remembered. It was my damn speech.

“Well I’m standing here right now telling you that if you get in that car you will be safe. *They* are not in that car, Gerard. Trust me. I will *not* let *them* hurt you. Your –,” he paused for a moment as though the next words hurt to say. “Your secrets are safe,” he said eventually.

I didn't believe him and he knew it. He thought for another minute.

"If you love me," he said, "you won't let me get in that car by myself." He walked towards the car and opened the door. He threw one last pleading look at me and climbed inside the car.

I tried to cry out to warn him but my voice caught in my throat. This is blackmail. He is emotionally blackmailing me. Little bastard; he's lucky I do love him so fucking much. How did he know to use my emotional attachment against me? Did he know I loved him? Holy shit, that must've been what Markman told him just before!

What an evil backstabbing, conniving bitch!

I obviously didn't have a choice. I couldn't let Frank leave because that would essentially be me telling him I didn't love him. I took a deep breath, my chest growing as I sucked in the air. I exhaled deeply, trying to dispel the dread that saturated every thought that flitted through my head. Feeling intensely nauseous I strode over the car and ducked down so I could clamber in.

Once I was inside I sat very upright and as close to the side as I could without falling out. I didn't dare look at the driver. Frank reached over me and yanked the door shut and the moment it was closed, the car roared off the side of the road. I attempted to mentally push the consuming fear out of my body but I only ended up amplifying it.

"Yo," the driver said over his shoulder but I ignored him.

"You got in the car," Frank said softly and with an air of stunned disbelief.

I looked at him. "Of course I did." I paused. "I love you." There. I said it. I told Frank what I had wanted to tell him for as long as I could remember. It was probably a mistake. It was the perfect moment though, I'll admit that much.

Frank didn't look at me. "I know you do," he said faintly. That was it.

It was the ensuing silence that killed me. He didn't say it back. He should have said, "I love you, too." But he didn't. Was it because he didn't feel that way? I don't know. I just know that I made a fucking fool out of myself in front of some of random guy who may or may not be someone who wanted to kill me.

"I can't –," Frank began.

“It’s okay,” I said loudly, speaking over him. “Forget I said anything. It was stupid. I’m sorry.”

“…wasn’t stupid,” Frank murmured twisting his hands together painfully in his lap.

Another minute of silence followed and the only sound was the powerful engine roaring as we sped down the deserted road. I had no fucking idea where we were going. That probably wasn’t a good thing. My anxiety had dropped slightly when I established that the driver was not wearing the faceless mask or the bullet-proof vest that *they* always wore. But that didn’t mean anything really.

I jumped as I suddenly felt Frank shift towards me, his hand cupping the left side of my face to turn my head towards him. Before I even had a chance to formulate a thought about what he was doing, he was leaning in and pressing his soft lips onto mine. It was strikingly deliberate and I instantly leant in to make the action mutual. It was very tentative at first, as though we both weren’t sure if we should be doing what we were doing.

I suddenly didn’t care if the driver was planning to kill me. He *could* kill me for all I cared right now.

He pulled away a little bit and slid his hand up into my hair, tightening his grip and pulling me in again. The hesitation on both sides was significantly less the second time around and the passion seemed to prevail over the apprehension and anxiety. My breathing hitched as my instinct took over my highly inexperienced lips. I reached out with my fingers to tug on Frank’s shirt and as I raised it slightly I gently touched the skin over his ribs. He shivered but didn’t break the kiss. In fact he grabbed my hand with his free hand and placed it on his bare skin of his side. I took it as a cue to slowly run my hands over his side and up his back.

His warm, wet lips were seriously causing a type of intense pleasure I had never felt before in my entire life. I felt like my mind was going to explode. I’m pretty sure this is the best day of my life.

He pulled away again so our foreheads were touching and our lips were just ghosting each other. After that he slowly pulled away. I was slightly relieved; I needed a moment to regather myself and my thoughts.

The silence this time was not awkward or forced. I licked my lips, still feeling rather light-headed from what had just happened. Frank had

kissed me. It was unbelievable.

I glanced at Frank but he wasn't looking at me. He was sitting very subdued in his seat, his hands folded on his lap. He was staring very intensely at the floor mats, a coy smile playing about on his lips. The lips I had just kissed.

The driver cleared his throat. "Well," he said good-naturedly, "I sure wasn't expecting that."

Frank and I both chuckled like fucking school kids. I actually felt incredibly embarrassed at my immaturity. See what this boy does to me?

"I'm Lou, by the way," the driver said cheerfully, glancing back at us both.

Excuse me, please keep your eyes on the road; I do not wish to end up in multiple pieces on the side of the road if you lose control and collide with a semi trailer. I decided to put on my seat belt.

Frank and I both introduced ourselves and Lou nodded as though we were just confirming our identity to him. "So you guys are friends with Ray, right?"

I stayed silent. I guess you could consider Ray and I to be friends? Okay, maybe only on Mars. Frank answered for us both, speaking very highly of Ray and his character, something I wouldn't have been able to do without lying. "Thank you for helping us," Frank said at the end and I echoed his thanks.

Lou shrugged. "It's cool. How is Ray, by the way? Is he still getting those crazy messages of his?" I sniggered before I could help it and Frank shot me an annoyed look. Lou laughed. "It's okay," he said. "It's pretty crazy shit. I just hope he's getting the help he needs. Apparently the attending doctor is really good, yeah?"

"Yeah," Frank said earnestly.

I didn't say a word. If I started bitching about that demon woman I would never be able to stop.

"Good, good," Lou said. "So, where am I taking you, by the way?"

I glanced at Frank. I hoped to God he knew because I had no fucking idea. I knew we were going to Frank's house to get 'things', but I had

no idea where that was. I assumed it was close by?

Frank leant forward and pulled a piece of paper from his pocket. “Belleville,” he said. “Do you know where that is?”

Lou nodded much to my relief. I was also very relieved that he turned out to be legitimate. I felt bad for doubting Ray and even entertaining the thought that he would sell me out to my enemies.

“How long will it take?” I asked.

Lou thought for a moment. “Well,” he said slowly, “if I take the I-78 and then get off at the parkway… maybe an hour, at the most. I mean, it’s the middle of the night so there’s hardly any traffic so we’ll probably make really good time.”

Frank was nodding eagerly. Probably because he knew what the fuck the I-78 and the parkway were. I assumed they were highways but that was the extent of my knowledge. I sighed. I didn’t like not being in control. The unpredictability of the situation I had just put myself in was making me very nervous. I had been away from Bluestone for less than 30 minutes and already I felt utterly unprotected and overexposed. I hadn’t expected to feel this way so soon.

I sat in silence for the rest of the way, concentrating on not upsetting my already incredibly nauseous stomach. Frank and Lou chatted casually about unimportant things such as bands and guitars. I had no interest in either things at this exact moment and did not join in the conversation.

Lou estimated the duration of the trip accurately. Fifty minutes after we left Bluestone, Frank was leaning in next to Lou giving him directions to his house from the freeway exit. The sun was just beginning to rise and the sky was just beginning to turn a brilliant reddish-yellow colour. I had never seen a proper sunrise before but the significance and beauty of it seemed to elude me. I’m sure if I wasn’t in the middle of escaping from a mental institution I would’ve appreciated it more.

Lou pulled over on the side of an average suburban street in front of average suburban houses. “You sure this is all you need me to do?” he asked pulling the handbrake into position and turning around in his seat to face us.

Frank nodded. “The train station is just a couple of minutes away. We’re just gonna get some stuff from my house and then take the train

to…somewhere. We'll be okay. Thank you so much for helping us."

Lou looked dubious of Frank's plan but didn't say anything. "Okay," he said, extending his hand and shaking both mine and Frank's. "Nice to meet you both. Best of luck with whatever the hell it is you're doing."

We both climbed out and Lou sped off leaving us alone in the dark street. Frank nodded, silently reaffirming something to himself and marched over to one of the houses. I hurried after him. The house he walked up to was the classic American dream home. It was easily one of the biggest and most impressive houses in the street. Even in the dim light from the rising sun, I could make out the perfectly cut lawn and the pristine paint job. The flawlessness of the house didn't sit well with me. It made the place look cold and lifeless.

I trailed after Frank still observing the house. He walked across the lawn to a gate and opened it. He beckoned me through and I walked into the backyard. It was slightly less perfect the front yard but still pretty darn immaculate. No wonder Frank's parents had so much trouble accepting what had happened to Frank – they were surrounded and sheltered by perfection and stereotype.

I hadn't even been inside yet and already I was reminded of The Stepford Wives. Now that was a fucking scary movie. I had been forced to watch during rec time one day and hated every minute of it.

Frank was ferreting around by the backdoor, picking up ornaments and looking under them. I assumed he was searching for a key. When I own my own home I will never leave a key under a statue. How stupid. You might as well invite robbers into your home and save them the trouble of searching for the key.

"Damn it," Frank muttered as he overturned the last statue. He glanced up. "That window doesn't lock," he said pointing to the most inaccessible window on the entire house. I groaned. I was not going to climb in a window. Frank came over to me and placed his hand on my shoulder. "Give me a boost," he ordered and raised one leg.

I gave him a look, advising him against the endeavour but he ignored it. "Lift," he repeated and I held my hands out for him to put his foot in. I summoned all my strength and raised Frank as high as I could. His fingers brushed against the small ledge that ran under the window but he wasn't high enough to climb up.

"Oi!"

Frank and I both jumped in surprise and I just managed to catch Frank before he smashed his head on the ground. We spun around and saw a man glaring at us over the fence.

“I calling the police!” the man exclaimed.

Run. Run. Run. Run. Run.

Instead of running in the opposite direction, Frank ran over to the fence towards the man. “Mr. Lynch!” he cried. “It’s me! It’s Frank!”

The man lowered the phone from his ear and narrowed his eyes at Frank. “Frank Iero?”

Frank nodded enthusiastically. “I live here,” he explained.

Mr. Lynch threw his hands up in frustration. “What are you doing here? It’s 5am in the morning. I thought you went to Colorado or something? You got into some boarding school? No, no, wait, it was Washington. I think.”

Even from where I was standing over ten metres away I could tell Frank was utterly devastated by the lie his parents had told his neighbour. A boarding school was extremely different to a mental institution. They weren’t even comparable.

“Is that right?” Mr. Lynch prompted.

Frank nodded. “Yeah,” he lied. “It’s in Washington, you were right. I decided I would come home for the mid-term break but I left my keys in my dorm. I thought mom kept a spare set in the garden. I wanted to surprise her when she came home from work.”

Mr. Lynch swallowed every lie Frank fed him. “Who’s that,” he asked, pointing to me. Why the fuck was he looking at me like that? He was looking at me as though he recognised me, which was impossible.

“That’s my roommate. His parents are overseas…in Italy!” Frank seemed pleased that his lie now had supporting details. “He had nowhere to go for the break so I invited him home.”

I nodded at Frank’s crazy neighbour. I didn’t like him. I had an uneasy feeling about him.

“Do you happen to have a spare key?” Frank asked hopefully.

Mr. Lynch nodded. “Yeah, your mother gave me the one from the

garden after she started working these night shifts. I'll just go and get it." He left and returned a few minutes later with the set of keys and tossed them to Frank over the fence. "You keep 'em," he said. "You'll need 'em more than me. Tell your mom she can just give 'em back when you leave again." He stared at me again.

Frank nodded and thanked him and walked extremely casually over to the door. He unlocked it and we went inside. As soon as the door was closed, Frank said, "That was weird. That seemed weird to you, right?" We peered through the curtains and saw that Mr. Lynch was still at the fence, watching the house.

Frank and I exchanged a worried look. "Let's do this really quickly," I said, pulling the curtains closed so no one could see in. Frank agreed and led the way up to his room. As we made our way through the living room and up the stairs I felt unnerved at how perfect the interior was. I shook my head at the plastic-covered lounges and tried not to stare at Frank's arse as he climbed the stairs in front of me.

Frank's room was covered in a fine layer of dust. It looked like no one had entered it in months. Frank stood in the doorway staring despondently at the bed in the middle of the room. I didn't know why. Maybe it had something to do with two men? I didn't dare ask. I squeezed past him and wandered around the massive room looking at his belongings. He had a very impressive CD collection in one corner and an electric guitar surrounded by several different sized amps in the other. I glanced out the window and saw that the neighbour was still standing by the fence staring at the house. What the fuck?

Frank snapped out of his staring and threw me an old backpack. "Can you pull out that bottom drawer for me," he asked pointing to his cupboard. As I crouched down and grabbed a hold of the handles I saw Frank grab a slim piece of metal out of his sock drawer and crawl under his bed. I heard the sound of a floorboard being pried out of position and then rustling as Frank ferreted around in the space he had just created. A minute later he crawled back out pushing several large wads of money in front of him. I blinked in surprise. I really thought that much money ought to be kept in a bank or somewhere more secure then under a floorboard. He gathered them all up in his hands and bought them over to me. He dropped them at my feet.

"There's another bag in there," he said quietly and pointed to the drawer I was supposed to be opening. Why was he suddenly so sad? Did it have something to do with the room?

Oh fuck.

I know what it is. I felt sick to my stomach at the thought.

I grabbed one of the wads and flicked through it. The first one was just over a thousand dollars. I had no doubt that the others were the same. “Where did this come from?” I asked. I was dying to know why Frank kept five thousand dollars hidden under his bed.

“It doesn’t matter,” Frank said and started pulling clothes off hangers in his cupboard. “Here. Try this on,” he said and threw a shirt at me. “It’s too big for me. You’ll need a change of clothes,” he said as I frowned.

Well, yes, I know I will need a change of clothes. What I didn’t know was why the fuck you keep five thousand dollars in your room. “Frank, where did the money come from?” I pressed.

Frank ignored me and continued to stuff clothes into another backpack.

“Frank?” I said more insistently.

Frank threw the bag to the ground. “I said it doesn’t matter!” he exclaimed angrily and stormed out of the room.

I stared after him in disbelief. What the fuck was going on? Holy fuck, I hope he didn’t steal it or anything. Should I follow him? I decided to count to ten before heading out after him.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten.

Okay. Go.

I lay the shirt Frank had tossed me on the bed and walked out into the corridor. I had no fucking idea where Frank would have gone. I walked through the entire second floor of the house, searching all the bedrooms and bathrooms but couldn’t find him. I did note that Frank’s parent’s bedroom felt very empty. I snooped in their closet and noticed that there were none of Frank’s father’s clothes in there and there was only one toothbrush in the bathroom. I guess Frank’s parents really were separated. I wonder if he knew that his dad had moved out. Maybe he did know and that was why he was so upset.

I descended the stairs and walked back into the living room. Frank was sitting on the plastic covered sofa staring intently at the blank TV.

I sat down next to him but didn't say anything. I didn't say anything because I had no idea what to say. I didn't know if I should I say something comforting, or apologetic or funny. I should probably go with comforting now that I think about it.

"They asked me to run away with them."

My ears perked up as Frank began to speak very softly. He was saying each word very slowly as though he had to force them out of his mouth.

"And I wanted to. So I began withdrawing money out of my bank account every week. I only took out small amounts at a time so dad wouldn't notice."

Smart. I knew that Frank's father probably would've flipped if he knew what Frank was really going to use the money for.

"But then they said I couldn't come with them anymore and they were leaving by themselves." He paused and took a deep breath. "Well, you know the rest," he said bitterly and stood up. "I'm gonna finish packing. Grab some food for the road?"

I nodded but he was already walking back upstairs. I watched him go, my heart aching again. I hated to see him like this. I needed to fix him. But how? I headed into the kitchen and starting packing some cans of soup and other assorted non-perishables into a plastic shopping bag. I opened the fridge and peered inside. It was packed full of leftovers and I even considered taking a few of the containers. I probably would have if I thought they would keep outside of the refrigerator. I grabbed two bottles of water and closed the door. There was half a loaf of bread on the kitchen bench and I collected that too. I stowed it in next to the cans of soup. Next to where the bread was sitting was a large to-do list that Frank's mom had obviously written.

I picked it up and read it. It was horribly mundane.
- Pay heating bill
- Call gardener
- Buy spare battery for camera
- RSVP Tom + Sue wedding
- Check oil
- Buy milk and bread
- Pay insurance
- !! Return call: Dr. Markman (Frank's doctor)

I stopped as I read the note about Markman. How long ago did she

call Frank's mother? What did she call her about? It seemed unusual. I glanced around for the phone and checked the message bank. There was one old message saved on the machine and I hit play, praying it was the message from Markman.

I was right. Fuck yes. According to the pre-recorded date, the message had been received just yesterday at 11:45am. Maybe Markman left it after Frank had his little freak out over the newspaper article.

"Hello, Mrs. Iero, its Dr. Jillian Markman from Bluestone, Frank's doctor. I'm just ringing because I have some pressing issues I urgently need to discuss with you relating to Frank and his future care and I request that you ring me back as soon as you can. You can contact me directly on 594-113-4212. Thank you."

She hung up and the pre-recorded voice told me the time and date again. How interesting. I wondered what she was referring to. There wasn't any way of knowing so I didn't waste any time trying to figure it out. I placed all the food on the bench and made a mental note to collect it when we left. I hesitated as I was leaving the kitchen. Should I leave a note or something? I felt like I had a responsibility to let Frank's mom know that Frank was okay. As soon as she found out that Frank had disappeared from the facility she might be worried. I grabbed the to-do list and flipped it over to the blank side. I grabbed a pen and scrawled:

'Dear Frank's mother,
I'll take care of him. I promise.
We took some of your food too, sorry.
Yours sincerely,
Gerard.'

I nodded approvingly and set it down in the middle of the bench where she would be sure to see it. I was just leaving the kitchen when Frank came down the stairs carrying the two backpacks. I accepted the one that was the most empty and packed as much food as I could into it. Frank stuffed the last few cans of soup into his backpack and slung it over his back.

"What's this?" he asked, pointing to my note.

I went red. "I didn't want your mom to worry," I said defensively. "I wanted her to know I would look after you."

Frank smiled slightly and grabbed the pen I had left next to the note. He looked like he was about to add to what I had written but instead

put the pen back down and headed towards the laundry. I followed him but he stopped again. He glanced back at the note and sighed, obviously torn. He dropped the backpack on the ground and walked back to the note. He picked the pen back up and added something to what I had written. After he finished the sentence he put the pen back down and stared at the note. I dropped my bag and walked back over to him. He had written one line in his characteristically messy handwriting. All he put was: 'Don't worry about us.'

I could tell that he couldn't muster up the courage to put down how he really felt. I knew what he really wanted to say. I knew he was dying to tell his mother how much the lie about the boarding school hurt him. I put my arm around his shoulder and pulled him in close. I pressed my lips to the side of his head. "Write it," I whispered in his hair.

He shook his head. "No." He placed the pen back down and pulled away from my embrace. "Let's go."

I sighed and picked my own bag up off the ground and walked to the laundry. We decided we were going to leave via the side entrance in the laundry so Frank's creepy neighbour didn't see us leave. I still had a really uneasy feeling about him.

Frank deposited the keys in the letterbox and headed off down the street. I took one last look at Frank's house and hurried to catch up with him. The sun had completely risen now. I hadn't realised we had been inside Frank's house for so long. We passed a ridiculous amount of people out walking and jogging. Who the fuck actually goes jogging this early? No, actually, who the fuck goes jogging at all?

"Put this on," Frank said shortly, handing me a cap. It had a logo on it for a mining company.

I stared at it. I was not putting that on. Frank glared at me. I put it on.

I didn't want to argue with him. He was obviously still very upset.

It didn't take very long to reach the train station. Even this early in the morning it was packed with people making their way to work. Frank walked up to the timetable. "I think we should get the first train that leaves," he said.

I agreed and Frank went off to buy the tickets, leaving me alone. I swallowed nervously as people bustled around me. I don't remember being around this many people in my entire life. I wished Frank would

hurry up. A businessman ran into me and made me stagger to the side. He apologised over his shoulder as he kept hurrying to catch his train. I backed into the wall, watching everyone intently. I hoped no one tried to stab me. Or shoot me.

Frank reappeared again, clutching two tickets. “Come on,” he said. “It leaves in three minutes.”

“So many people,” I muttered, grabbing onto his sleeve and trailing after him towards the platform.

I’m scared. I’ll admit it. I suddenly craved the safety and quiet of the institution. Who would’ve thought that I’d miss that hellhole?

“Gerard?” Frank shook me roughly. I jerked to attention and looked at him. “Are you okay?” he asked.

I didn't remember getting from the bustling platform to the seat on the train. I think I may have freaked out a little bit and, in an attempt to cope, shut my brain off, preventing it from overanalysing everything and frightening me even more.

“Uh huh,” I said absently, glancing back to the window and realising we were moving. “Wait, where are we at the moment?”

Frank looked concerned and made me drink some water. I did what he wanted me to do because there was no use trying to fight him – he would make me do it one way or another. We sat on the train for another hour before Frank dragged me off in the middle of nowhere.

“What are you doing?” I asked as the train left the station leaving us standing on the platform. “This isn’t our stop.”

Frank looked at me like I was being a bit slow. “We need to keep changing trains. We can’t take one train to one place or they’ll be able to find us too easy. We need to cover our tracks.”

Frank was talking as though we were being hunted or something. I thought he was being a little too over-cautious. It’s not like the CIA were coming after us or anything. Despite this I allowed Frank to buy a new set of tickets for the next train. We boarded this one and only rode it for an hour before getting off again at a random stop. We did this again and again and again until the sun started to go down.

By the time Frank decided we should stop I was completely lost and exhausted and cranky. We had managed to nap briefly during the trips

but I was dying to lie down and sleep properly. We hadn't had any sleep the previous night and it was starting to take a toll on both of us. We had stopped talking to each other after the fifth train change because we were both too afraid we would get angry at each other and say some we'd regret.

We ended up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I honestly did not give a fuck where we were. All I cared about was finding some sort of accommodation and sleeping.

We left the train station and headed for the main street. There were still a lot of people around luckily. I tried to avoid eye contact; I didn't want to be stabbed. I yawned as we trudged down the street looking for a motel that wasn't too dodgy. Eventually we found one that we both agreed looked pretty decent.

We were making our way to reception when Frank stopped. He dug into his pocket and handed me a handful of crumpled fifty dollar bills. "You'll have to go in and get the room without me," he said.

Um, what? "Why?!" I said horrified, my fist clenching the money tightly.

"I look too young to get a room by myself and she might ask for ID. And and we can't be seen together. It's too risky. You'll be fine, though, don't stress." He smiled at me, trying to dispel my terror. Why the fuck was Frank acting like we were on some sort of secret espionage mission? We escaped from a fucking mental institution not a fucking prison. We weren't wanted criminals. Frank had a lot of explaining to do.

"Frank," I said urgently. "Please don't make me."

He scowled. "Do you want to sleep in a bed tonight, Gerard?" he asked.

"Of course!" I said, annoyed.

"Then go get a room," he said and pointed to the reception.

I shot him a dirty look and walked very slowly over to the office that was marked by a bright flashing neon light. I pushed open the door and cringed as a bell announced my presence. An older lady appeared from a backroom. She stood behind the counter expectantly.

"I need a room," I muttered.

I really, desperately hoped that she wasn't one of *them*. Maybe *they* were expecting me?

"Just for you, sweetie?" she asked placing a log book in front of me. I panicked. What should I write? I obviously couldn't write my own name and I had no fucking idea what I should put for a phone number or address. Oh fuck, why wasn't Frank doing this?

I realised she asked me a question and just nodded even though I hadn't heard what she said. She turned to grab a key. "Just fill this out," she prompted, handing me a pen.

I filled the log book with lies. I tried not to hesitate too much as I was writing so she wouldn't get suspicious and realise I was making everything up. She held her hand out for the money and I didn't hear how much she was asking for so I just stuffed three of the bills into her hand. She seemed satisfied with what I gave her because she handed me the key.

"Thanks," I muttered and retreated as quickly as I could without bolting out the door. I glanced at the room number and headed up the stairs towards it. I slid the key in the door and opened it. As soon as I flicked on the light I breathed a sigh of relief at the decency of the room. Frank appeared behind me and shut the door before wrapping his arms around me.

"I'm so proud of you," he said earnestly, squeezing me tightly. I hugged him back and we stood there in the middle of the room in each other's arms. I didn't want to let him go. "I'll even forgive you for that," he said pointing to the only bed in the room. It was only a double bed. He grinned at me. "Guess we're sharing," he said merrily and threw himself onto the bed. I sure didn't mind about that.

I double checked that the door was locked before kicking off my shoes and joining him.

"This is unbelievable," Frank said, his words slurred as he fought off the sleep. "We did it, Gerard."

"We did it," I echoed. I didn't quite believe it yet.

Frank didn't say anything else and I glanced across to see he was almost asleep. I sat up and, as gently as I could, yanked his shoes off. I tossed them to the floor and pulled the blanket out from underneath him. I pulled it up over him and he smiled, his eyes still closed as I tucked him in. I lay back down next to him, pulling the blanket up to

my chin and staring around the room anxiously. I don't think I'll be able to sleep tonight. I hadn't wanted Frank to know but I was absolutely terrified. The thought of not being safe made me sick to the stomach. When I had thought about escaping I hadn't thought about the harshness of the environment I had to suddenly adjust to. The real world was a scary place and I realised that now. Bluestone was a fucking safe haven compared to it.

From the street I heard people yelling and sirens and my bottom lip trembled slightly. I wasn't going to cry or anything; I was just scared out of my brain. The only thing stopping me from calling Markman right now and asking her to come and get me was Frank. I loved Frank more than anything and I would sacrifice everything to stay with him.

I *was* sacrificing everything to be here with him.

It was quite clear that I was not in my Wonderland anymore.

"The main symptom of a psychiatric case is that the person is perfectly unaware that he is a psychiatric case."

My eyes flicked open.

Where the *fuck…. Oh.*

Oh! Fuck.

I sat up hastily, letting go of the blanket I had been clutching to my chest. My eyes darted around the room frantically as I struggled to take in everything. Finally, they settled on the empty spot next to me on the bed. I stumbled slightly in my haste to stand up and steadied myself on the wall. Where the fuck was Frank? Had he left?

I hurried over to the bathroom and grabbed the handle. I hesitated and leant in close to hear the sounds of the shower running. I let go of the handle with a sigh of relief. He hadn't left me. Thank fuck.

I turned around and surveyed the room again. I still didn't quite comprehend the fact that I was in a motel room in some random town. I don't think I've ever stayed in a motel. It felt strange.

My stomach rumbled suddenly, much to my immense surprise. I wasn't used to being this hungry. The meals at Bluestone were so regular we never got a chance to be hungry. That's probably why I put on those 5 pounds. I grabbed one of the backpacks that we'd thrown on the floor the night before and started rifling through it for some food. I knew there was a loaf of bread in here somewhere….

Ah. As I pulled it out I heard a rattling noise. I froze, the bread clutched tightly in my hand. With my free hand I dug around in the bag searching for the source of the rattling noise. I pulled out a brown paper bag. I frowned. I didn't remember picking up a paper bag at Frank's house.

Fuck. This was what Markman gave Frank! This was the package. I had forgotten about it. How the fuck had I forgotten? I don't forget things. What is going on with me lately?

I put the package back into the bag and it rattled again as I handled it.

My curiosity piqued. To me, it sounded like medication. But why would Frank have a bag full of meds? No, it must be something else. I glanced towards the bathroom. I wondered how much longer he would be. I really wanted to know what Markman gave him. What could be so important that she had to do it secretly?

It wouldn't hurt if I took a quick look. Frank takes forever in the shower. If I'm careful I can undo the tape without ripping the paper. Yeah.

No. That would betray Frank's trust. I'll wait.

I stood up and pulled a piece of bread from the plastic wrapping. I took one bite and stopped, disappointed. The bread was stale and inedible. Maybe if I toasted it…?

I stood up and checked the tiny little kitchen for a toaster but all I could find was a kettle, an almost empty fridge and an iron. Why would they have an iron but not a toaster?

Can you toast bread with an iron?

I took another bite of the bread and chewed thoughtfully. Nope, not nice at all. Fuck it, I'll eat something else. I knelt down by the backpack again and as I rifled through it I knocked the package and it rattled again! Fuck, this was killing me.

I pulled it out of the backpack and gently pried the tape away from the paper. It didn't rip. I hesitated again. Fuck it, I've already come this far. I opened the package and slipped my hand inside. It closed around a small bottle. I pulled the bottle out and looked at it.

It was a bottle of pills. I read the label: Clozapine 100mg Tablets.

Fuck.

My pills.

Or rather, the pills Markman had me on to control my non-existent "delusions." What the fuck was Frank doing with this? I tipped the rest of the contents of the package onto the floor. I counted three more bottles of the same medication. Surely Frank didn't think I needed it? I'm not crazy. I don't need pills to make me better when I wasn't even sick to begin with. Maybe Frank didn't know what was in the package when Markman gave it to him?

Oh, hang on. What if Frank did know? What if….

I glanced fearfully at the bathroom door but it remained shut. I'm not going to deny that I've had thoughts about Frank and his intentions. There had always been a tiny little part of me that had doubts over whether it truly was a coincidence that Frank was institutionalised in the same facility as me. That tiny little part had always been fearful that Frank had been sent by *Them* to infiltrate the facility and befriend me. It was a valid concern.

He could've planted the pills there so I would find them. He knew I was unashamedly inquisitive. Or he could've slipped up. Maybe he meant to hide them but ran out of time or never had the opportunity. For all I knew they could be sleeping pills. Frank could have been planning to slip one into my food when I wasn't looking and then steal my secrets as I was trapped in a drug induced state of unconsciousness. This could've been Frank's plan all along – get me out of Bluestone so he could drug me and steal my secrets.

My head snapped up as I suddenly realised Frank was standing in the doorway of the bathroom watching me. I scrambled to my feet, still clutching one of the bottles of pills.

Frank shot a puzzled look at me in response to my stricken face. Then his eyes dropped down to the pill bottle I clutched in my hand. A horrified looked covered his face and he opened his mouth as if to explain. The look on his face worried me. Was he horrified because I had found the stash of pills he was planning to drug me with or was he horrified because he knew his plan had been foiled?

"I can explain," he blurted out. I bit my lip. I didn't want him to be working for *Them.* Please don't let him be working for *Them*. I think I would accept any other excuse.

"Markman gave them to me."

I take that back – I would accept *any* excuse except *that* one.

I stared at him. I couldn't tell if he was telling me the truth or not. He was an excellent liar. He told everyone he knew he was fine for months and they believed him. "Are you lying to me?" I asked.

Frank's eyes widened. Was he worried about being caught out, maybe? "No," he said intently.

I bit my bottom lip, concerned. Frank seemed very concerned as well.

“Dr. Markman gave them to me,” he insisted. “She said…,” he trailed off as though realising he shouldn’t finish his sentence.

“What did she say?” I asked, keeping my voice measured to hide my anger. I couldn’t decide whether I was angry with Frank or Markman. Probably Markman.

“Why don’t you believe me?” he asked suddenly and took a determined step forward. I sucked in a lungful of air and exhaled in a futile attempt to suppress my anger. Frank’s defensiveness was not helping his case.

I didn’t answer Frank’s question. If he was one of *Them* or even if he was just sent by Them, I still didn’t want to alert him to the fact that I knew who he was. I needed to be tactful about this. It would be a pathetic ending to my story – I died because I was stupid enough to fall in love with one of *Them*.

Holy fuck. This could be why Frank never said, “I love you,” back to me. Maybe he didn’t love me because he had been using me all this time. Fuck.

Frank walked over to me and I watched him nervously. Was he going to stab me with some hidden knife? “Gerard, what’s wrong?” he asked, reaching out to touch my arm.

I jerked away from him much to his surprise. “What did I do?” he questioned, keeping his voice very calm and level.

I glanced away towards the front door but was quickly bought back to the situation by Frank’s pulling on my arm. I stepped away from his grasp fearfully and he let his arms fall to his sides limply, defeated. “Is this about the pills?” he asked.

I couldn’t stand it anymore. I needed to know. Yes, he would lie, but I’ll deal with that later.

“Are you working for *Them?* ” I blurted out and prepared myself mentally to run for the door. I stared at his eyes intensely looking for some sort of silent confirmation.

Frank’s mouth dropped open and he tipped his head slightly to the right. “Oh,” he said softly and raised a hand to push the hair out of his face.

Oh? Why did he say that? That wasn’t the reaction I was expecting. I

was expecting panic as he realised his cover was blown. I was even bracing myself for him to stab me. He shook his head at me slowly, his face a mixture of sadness and guilt.

"I'm not working for *Them*, Gerard."

Oh, thank fuck for that. Now, he better be telling the truth – I don't think my heart can take any more. I *think* he was telling the truth – he did keep eye contact. That was a sign of truthfulness, right? Fuck, I don't know.

"Promise?" I said suspiciously.

He sighed. "Yes." Then he stared at me and said, very gently, "They're not real, Gerard."

Markman had gotten to him. She had convinced him that I was crazy. I'm not crazy. They're real. I've seen them. If they weren't real then why have I seen them? You don't see things that aren't real. I glanced down at the pill bottle in my hand. These were my meds. Frank had accepted them from Markman because he agreed with her. He thought I was crazy and that I needed to be 'fixed'. I'm not crazy.

"You think I'm crazy."

Frank's eyes widened. "No!" he replied immediately. His response was too quick to be genuine.

"It wasn't a question," I said brusquely and stared bitterly at the bottle.

Frank grabbed at his hair pitifully. "I don't think you're crazy," he objected weakly.

I raised an eyebrow at him. "Oh, you *don't* think I'm crazy."

Frank shook his head wildly. "No, you're just…," he trailed off again.

I wrenched the lid off one of the pill bottles. "What? Sick?! Is that what Markman said too? Did she say I was sick and that these pills could fix me?" I poured the pills onto my hand and held them out to show him.

"You're scaring me," Frank said quietly, refusing to look at the pills I had sitting in my palm.

I ignored him. "Did she tell you about all the people I murdered,

Frank? Is that why you're scared of me? Did Markman tell you that I'd hurt you if I didn't take these pills? Do you think I'm going to kill you, Frank? Is that why you kept the pills? Markman told you I go crazy without them and that I'd hurt you? I would never hurt you! No pill will change that."

"I'm sure you never meant to hurt Michael either," Frank murmured.

I threw the bottle and the pills in my hand against the wall with all the force I could muster. Frank visibly cringed away towards the bathroom as the pills scattered across the room like little bullets.

"You don't get to talk about him!" I screamed. I took a few heated steps towards Frank but stopped, struggling to contain my anger. He had no right to talk about Michael. He didn't know anything. Michael was *my* brother. I had done something bad but it was a mistake. It didn't mean anything. It didn't have anything to do with Frank. And it didn't mean I was crazy.

Frank seemed to be getting angry as well. "Stop yelling at me," he cried, clenching his fists by his side.

"I'm not crazy! Michael has nothing to do with *these*!" I exclaimed and brandished another bottle of pills I had picked up.

"I've *never said* you were crazy! You're just sick! But they can fix it, if you'd stop being such a dick and let Markman help you!"

"She *can't* help me. I'm not sick. There's nothing wrong with me!"

"They're just pills, Gerard. It's not a fucking lobotomy!"

I threw my hands up. "Lobotomy?! I'M NOT INSANE!"

Frank went silent. Eventually he threw his hands up in defeat. "I don't know what you want me to say."

I lowered my voice this time. "Tell me what she said to you?"

Frank sighed, aggravated. "She told me that I needed to get you to keep taking the medication or you could have one of your episodes. That's it!"

"And what did you say?"

"I said, 'okay'. What else was I supposed to say?"

“Did she tell you I was dangerous?”

Frank didn’t reply. I took that as a yes.

“I won’t hurt you.”

“Too late,” Frank said miserably and wouldn’t look me in the eye.

Fucking hell. Way to make me feel like shit. “So, how were you planning to get me to take the pills?” I asked.

Frank looked bewildered. “I don’t know! I hadn’t thought about it.”

“Were you going to drug me?”

“No!” Frank replied indignantly. “Stop being paranoid, please. Don’t you know me at all? I’m not going to drug you. I’m not one of them. I’m just me.”

I’m not paranoid. Being paranoid is a classic sign of a crazy person, but I wasn’t crazy – so I couldn’t be paranoid. It made sense to me. I didn’t understand why Frank was acting this way.

“You know what you’re doing?” he asked.

“What?” I replied indifferently.

“You’re being paranoid. If you took the pills, you wouldn’t have these types of thoughts.”

I gaped at him. “You want me to stop being me? If I take these pills I’ll stop thinking like me. Then I won’t be me. Is that what you want?”

“I want you to *know* you’re safe.”

“I am safe.”

Frank clenched his fists. “Gerard!” he exclaimed. “Less than five minutes ago you were convinced I was one of *Them*. And I bet you thought I was going to hurt you, didn’t you? Did I think I was going to stab you or drug you or cut open your brain? Don’t you want to be rid of those types of thoughts? How can you live like that?”

“…They made sense at the time,” I mumbled.

“What?!” Frank said, his voice rising again. “What on Earth made you think I was going to kill you? What brought it on?”

Because you didn't say it back. I looked at Frank meekly. He raised an eyebrow questioningly. I silently held up the pill bottle for him to see. "What else?" he demanded. "What was your next thought? What solidified the fact in your mind?"

"Never mind," I said and tried to walk away towards the bathroom. It was the only room I could go to where I wouldn't have to look at Frank's accusing face.

"Tell me," he demanded, stepping in my path.

"It doesn't matter!" I insisted.

"Stop trying to walk away from me," Frank snapped. "Tell me what you're thinking. I know it's running through your brain right now. Tell me."

"You never said it back," I muttered. It seemed petty now I said it aloud.

Frank knew straight away what I was talking about. He scowled. "Is that why you thought I was one of *them*?" he said indignantly.

I shrugged and eyeballed the pills on the carpet.

"Fucking hell, Gerard," Frank said and dropped to his knees and began picking up the tablets I had scattered everywhere.

I dropped to my knees as well and scooped up the ones closest to me. "It's not that hard," I lied. Saying those words were the hardest thing I've ever had to do in my life.

Frank looked at me, affronted. "Do you want me to say it?"

"No. Forgot I said anything."

"I love you. There, I said it. Happy now?" he said insincerely.

I threw the seven tablets I had collected onto the ground and stood up. "You know what?" I said angrily, "Fuck you, Frank." Frank's mouth dropped open. I didn't care. "*Fuck* you," I repeated and stormed out of the hotel room.

I marched along the balcony and down the steps. I strode all the way out of the motel lot and off down the street. It wasn't until I reached the next block that the panic set in. I froze, glancing around fearfully. Oh dear, this was a bad idea. I felt painfully exposed. Up until now I'd

always been accompanied by Markman or Frank when out in public. I'd never been alone out on the street before. I inhaled sharply as a massive truck trundled past me.

I needed to get off the street. I had escaped from a mental institution after all. An unknown evil force is hunting me; I probably shouldn't be standing in the middle of the footpath. I glanced around and ducked into the closest building, which happened to be some sort of diner. I slunk over to a booth in the corner and slipped into it. I scanned the room and studied all of the customers. None of them were looking at me. This was a good sign, *They* had spies everywhere. I had to be careful.

I wondered if Frank would come after me. I hoped he would but I didn't expect him to. I hadn't meant to speak to him like that, but he had pissed me off. Just because he was broken doesn't mean he gets to throw those words around like they meant nothing.

"Hey, what can I get you?"

I slowly tore my gaze away from the street and glanced at the young waitress standing patiently next to my table. I panicked and shook my head nervously. "Nothing," I mumbled and glanced away. It had been a long time since I'd spoken to a girl who wasn't crazy.

Markman doesn't count because she's a witch.

The girl didn't leave. What the fuck did she want? "Are you waiting for someone?" she prompted.

I shook my head and she sighed. "I'm sorry, but you can't stay here if you're not going to order anything."

I looked at her again, my eyes wide. Was she seriously going to kick me out? I'd like to see her try. I didn't want to kick up a fuss though. I couldn't draw attention to myself. Who knows where *They* had spies? The man across the room eating bacon and eggs with his fingers could be working for *Them* for all I knew.

"Can I get you some coffee?" she offered, smiling at me.

Oh, fuck, yes. I nodded. "Okay," I said and starting digging through my pockets for some change. I knew I had some coins and a few notes left over from the million train tickets I'd purchased yesterday. The waitress poured me a cup of the steaming liquid and the energising smell filled my nose. "How much?" I asked and spread my change all

over the table. I wasn't too good at this whole money thing.

The waitress smiled widely at me. "Well, sweetie," she said. "For you…it's half price."

For me? What the fuck does that mean? Did she know who I was? Had we met before? I shot her a puzzled look. She touched me on the shoulder and leant in. "Well, the cute ones get a discount," she said softly into my ear.

Huh? *Oh*. Gross. I don't like girls. I quickly picked up a five-dollar bill from the table and handed it to her just so she would go away. One of the customers at the next table signalled her and she left. Thank fuck for that.

Frank never came looking for me. I stared at the street for an hour but he never appeared. Did that mean he didn't care? I was still ridiculously angry with him, but I wanted him to care enough to come looking for me. The waitress came back three more times in that hour trying to refill my drink but I didn't let her. I suspected that her intentions were not honourable. The fourth time she tried to start a conversation with me. "So," she said, "have you got a girlfriend?"

I frowned. I had a boyfriend? Well, I think I still have a boyfriend. But she didn't ask me if I had a boyfriend. She asked me if I had a girlfriend – which I didn't have. I shook my head and she grinned widely. "No way?!" she exclaimed and giggled. I didn't understand how that was relevant to her job. Was it going to make the coffee she served me better or something?

I shrugged as she whipped out her order book and scribbled something down. She held the piece of paper out to me. I took it, but only because it seemed to be the only thing I could do. She had written a number down on the paper. "Call me?" she said sweetly and touched my shoulder again.

I quickly climbed out of the booth. "Sure," I lied and hurried from the diner. I didn't really understand what had just happened. I folded the piece of paper up into a tiny square and tucked it into my pocket. I wanted to discard it but I was afraid the girl might still be watching me. I didn't want to incur some sort of jilted waitress wrath. I made my way back down the block towards the motel. My anger with Frank had slowly been dissipating over the hour and was gone completely by the time I walked back onto the motel lot. I slowly climbed the stairs towards the first floor and noticed that Frank was sitting on the very

top step, waiting for me. He pursed his lips as he saw me and stood up sulkily. He came down the stairs and as he passed me he roughly shoved one of the backpacks into my chest. It winded me but I didn't say anything. I probably deserved it.

I followed him back down to the ground level and then back towards the train station. The station was relatively empty and we boarded the first one that came in. Frank was still giving me the silent treatment. I didn't know what to do. I debated over whether I should say something or let the painful and awkward silence remain. I decided I needed to say something. But what was I supposed to say? I spent a good hour going over hundreds of conversation starters in my head before I finally said, "Are you hungry?" I pulled out some of the change I'd found in my pockets at the diner and held it out to him.

He didn't even acknowledge that I had spoken. He just continued to stare out the window and made a point of giving me the cold shoulder. Rejected, I went back thinking of better things to say.

We changed trains all day again. I don't even know why we were still doing it. Frank was acting like we were running from bounty hunters or something. No one was following us. The day dragged on and on and I was ready to throw in the towel. If I knew I would be spending the first two days of my freedom on a fucking train I probably would've stayed in the mental institution.

It was late afternoon when Frank finally let us leave the train station. He took off down the street without even checking to see if I was following. The motel he picked this time was much nicer and it even had a pool. He wordlessly handed me some cash and pointed towards the reception. I felt slightly more comfortable getting the room this time and I was even considerate enough of Frank's mood to ask the guy for a room with two beds. He handed me a card and I made my way to the room. Frank followed me, still silent and sulky. Fucking hell, is it even possible to sulk for six hours straight?

Once inside the room Frank threw his bag onto one of the beds and stalked over towards the bathroom. I'd had enough.

"Frank, stop it," I said forcefully. Frank halted but kept his back to me. "I'm sorry," I said extremely sincerely.

He turned around. "For what?" he said. I could hear the sarcasm.

"For everything."

“Whatever,” he said, shrugged and began to walk towards the bathroom again. His attitude was making me mad. Couldn’t we just forget about the whole ‘I thought he was one of *Them* and was planning on drugging me’ thing?

I groaned and dropped my backpack on the floor. “Frank,” I said again.

Frank spun around. “*What*, Gerard?” he said savagely. “What do you want me to say?”

You could say that you loved me too. You know, just a suggestion. I didn’t say that out loud because I knew how Frank would react. “I’m sorry,” I said. Frank shrugged and I sighed. “I’m sorry,” I repeated. “I’m sorry.”

Frank scowled at me again. “Stop it,” he said.

But I wasn’t going to stop. “I’m sorry.”

“Stop saying it, Gerard.”

“I’m sorry.” Frank’s eyes narrowed and his brow creased adorably. He was cute when he was angry. “I’m sorry.”

Frank stomped his foot angrily. “Stop it!”

“No,” I said stubbornly. “I’m not going to stop until you stop being angry at me.” Frank glowered at me and folded his arms tightly over his chest. I continued, “I’m sorry.”

“I’m not angry,” Frank said and I could tell he was forcing his voice to remain level.

“Then why have you been ignoring me all day?”

“I’m not angry, I was just worried.”

I was not expecting that. I think my heart swelled at the thought of Frank caring enough about me to worry about me. I think that was a sign. You have to care a lot about someone to worry about them when they weren’t there.

“Oh. Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why were you worried about me? Did you think that maybe they’d found me?” That was really the only logical reason why Frank would be worried about me. *They* were the only people out there looking for me.

“Yeah,” Frank mumbled, turning away to rifle in his backpack, “something like that.”

“I’ll never let them get me, Frank.” Frank didn’t acknowledge what I’d said but I know he’d heard it. “I’m going to be here to protect you.” I took a hesitant step toward Frank but stopped as he straightened up.

Frank didn’t need to say anything; everything he was trying to say was written all over his worn and pale face. I reached out to touch him on the arm but suddenly hesitated as I remembered how sensitive he still was about being touched, even by me. Frank watched my arm extend, freeze several inches away from his arm and then fall back to my side.

His cheeks went red. “Fucking hell,” he said, devastation and rage evident in his voice.

“What?” I said urgently, wondering I’d done wrong now.

It was like a switch had flipped inside Frank. He went off. He stormed back and forth furiously clutching his hair and stomping his feet. I just gaped at him, ridiculously confused. I didn’t know what the fuck was happening. I’d never seen Frank so mad before.

“Frank,” I said loudly, trying to get his attention. I tried to grab him as he stormed past me but he pushed me away angrily.

“THEY RUINED EVERYTHING!” he exclaimed.

“Who did? What did they do? What are you –.”

“Who the fuck do you think, Gerard?!” he said hysterically.

I blinked stupidly. “Um….”

Frank threw his hands up. “They ruined my life. And now look! They ruined yours too!”

Surely Frank wasn’t talking about *Them*? He wasn’t working for *Them* was he?! Holy shit, maybe he was! Maybe his job was to get close to me to steal my secrets but he accidentally got to close and now *They* were out to get him too?

Fuck my fucking life.

“The men who RAPED me, Gerard!”

Okay, not *Them*. I won’t deny I was relieved. Okay, switching into amateur therapist mode.

“Look what they did to you, Gerard,” he said emphatically.

I wasn’t aware that they’d done anything to me. This is so confusing. I wish I had more experience in these sorts of emotional situations. “Frank….”

“No, don’t you see? I see it in you. You’re afraid of hurting me *all the time*. You can’t even touch me without feeling guilty. You can’t treat me like I’m normal. You always constantly doubt the things you say and do because you’re afraid of hurting me. They ruined you!”

“No, wait, Frank, what? That’s not true.”

Frank frowned at my argument. “Yes it is. How torturous is it living in constant doubt about how to act around me? Don’t you dare lie to me and tell me that you don’t second guess every single thing you do around me! You’re better off without me.”

Fuck. “No,” I exclaimed. “Stop talking like that.”

Frank tried to stare me down. “Gerard,” he said eventually. “You couldn’t even bring yourself to touch my arm just before so don’t you *dare* act like it’s not true.”

“I’m not leaving you.”

“Fine,” he said. I could tell he was trying to be indifferent but I could detect a tiny glimmer of happiness in him. “But you have to promise me you’ll treat me like I’m normal. Treat me like I’m your boyfriend, Gerard, not like I’m a poor damaged rape victim.”

“Okay, but….” I was frantically trying to get a word in but he kept stopping me.

“I don’t feel the bugs under my skin when you touch me, Gerard. Don’t treat me like I’m broken, even though I am. Treat me like I’m normal. Please. I just want to be normal again. Why don’t you understand?”

With that he retreated to the bathroom shutting the door in my face.

I stood in front of the bathroom door, a million thoughts falling over themselves in my head. Should I follow him? What did he mean when he said he wanted me to 'treat him like he's normal?' Did I have to do something different? I honestly thought I had been treating him relatively normal. I think he's been misinterpreting my hesitation as his fault. Honestly, my hesitation is because I'm a massive class A inexperienced virgin who doesn't know *how* to be in a relationship.

I grabbed the door handle but didn't open the door. Not yet. I needed to have a plan. Maybe I should just go in and kiss him?

Yes.

No.

Or maybe I should just sit back down on the bed and watch cartoons.

Yes.

I let go of the handle and picked up the television remote from the side table. The television flicked on and a news channel slowly appeared onto the screen. A female newsreader was in the middle of reading the news headlines. I hesitated in changing the channel to listen.

"Six miners have been killed in an explosion in a mining site in Texas. Authorities are investigating the cause of the explosion and the site is to be shut down indefinitely. Now, we cross to our political correspondent, Susie Carter, in Washington DC. Susie, the President issued a statement this morning in regards to the first son…."

The political correspondent nodded eagerly. "Good evening, yes it has been 40 hours since President Way's eldest son was reported missing from a secure mental health facility in Princeton, New Jersey and it was just this morning that President Way delivered a heartfelt plea seeking any information on –."

I switched the TV off in exasperation. I shouldn't be standing here. I should be with Frank. In a sudden rush of blood I strode over to the door, throwing it open. I stepped through the door and froze. I hadn't actually thought about what I was going to do *after* I opened the door. Frank slowly turned to look at me from where he was standing under the shower. I swallowed and started fumbling with my belt. I got halfway though undoing it when I thought that I should probably take my shirt off first. I let go of my belt and pulled my shirt off over my head, tossing it to the floor.

Frank stepped out from under the shower spray to stare at me. In one swift movement I finished unbuckling my belt and pulled my pants down. I stepped out of them and walked naked over to the shower. Frank pushed the door open for me, which I took as permission to join him. The door silently shut itself behind me and I was suddenly incredibly aware of the fact that I was naked and standing in a tiny shower cubicle with a naked Frank whom I happened to find very attractive.

I stepped in close to Frank, cupping the back of his neck and instinctively kissing him. It was probably the most forward thing towards him…ever. Sure *I'd* kissed *him* once before but I don't know if it could really be counted considering how terrible I was at it. Frank tipped his chin up and leaned into me, reciprocating the kiss. I was intensely aware of the fact that I was naked and that Frank was naked and that we were *almost* touching in places other than our lips.

I didn't wait long to make my next move. If Frank wanted me to treat him like normal than I was going to do exactly what I'd been dying to do for as long as I could remember since meeting him. I knew that the next few minutes were going to potentially ruin everything, but I had to take a chance. I broke away from Frank's lips but before he could even react I began kissing down his neck from his chin down to his collarbone. I migrated back up again and pressed my lips back onto the soft moist skin of his neck. With my lips still slightly apart I began to suck gently. I heard Frank gasp but despite his initial shock he let his head tip back, giving me better access. He wrapped his hand up around my back and dug his nails into the skin. I drew my breath in and sucked hard against Frank's neck. His breath hitched again and his hand shot up to grab the back of my head.

I didn't know how long I had to suck for but when I thought it had been long enough I pulled away. I actually felt proud at the intensity of the bruise I had caused on his normally pale neck. I leant back in and gently kissed the bruise several times before stepping back. Frank slowly lifted one hand to touch his neck, a slightly dazed look on his face. I didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing. I hope he didn't see the hickey as some sort of mark of possession. An adorable smile covered his face after another few seconds, much to my relief. I stepped back in and tipped his chin up, placing a fleeting kiss on them before gently setting my hand on his chest. Frank wrapped his hand up around behind my head again and pulled me in for a more passionate kiss. I opened my mouth and tried to kiss him back with the same fervour he was showing me. At the same time I let my hand drop lower and lower down Frank's chest, caressing him

unconsciously. It wasn't until my hand dropped to just below his navel that he reacted. He inhaled sharply and broke away from the kiss. His eyes were wide and his cheeks were flushed as he stared up at me. I didn't know what he was thinking but I was pretty sure he wasn't unconsciously telling me to back off. I shuffled to the side slightly and slowly, a few millimetres a second, moved my hand downwards.

It seemed like a lifetime before my hand reached his cock. Frank was still staring intensely at me as I wrapped my hand around him. Frank seemed to get hard almost immediately in my hand much to his obvious embarrassment and my amusement. His whole face went bright red and he couldn't bring himself to look me in the eye anymore. Instead, he chose to stare intently at the drain on the floor of the shower.

It was no secret that I've never given anyone a hand job before but I've given *myself* many in my lifetime. There was more than one advantage to insisting on showering solo back at Bluestone. I decided I would use the water that had been falling over us from the shower as lube and began to move my fist up and down. Frank's mouth dropped open and he began to lean into me for support as I began to thumb the head of his cock. Encouraged by Frank's obvious pleasure and body language I ran my fingers up the underside several times before going back to stroking him again.

It was Frank's moan that turned me on the most. He actually fucking *moaned*. I felt so proud; I was obviously doing something right. Really, all I was doing was what I liked. We must be more alike that I had originally thought. Frank was now pushing up against my hand and clinging to me with an increased sense of urgency. He had wrapped his arm up around my waist and it felt like his nails were an inch deep into my back. He buried his head into my neck in a poor attempt to drown out the incredible noises he was making as I kept alternating between stroking him and thumbing the head.

I've never seen Frank come before so I was watching him very intently for any signs that he was close. I couldn't help but grin at the faces he was making. His mouth was slightly open and he was sucking in air in short, sharp bursts. His eyes were clenched shut and his brow was furrowed. It was actually ridiculously easy to tell when Frank was on the verge of coming so I sped up to help him along.

The only word I could discern in the noises he was made when he came was, "fuck." His toes curled inwards on the tiles and his face scrunched up as he came hot and sticky all over my leg. As soon as he

was finished I let go but didn't move away. I could feel my heart beating wildly in my chest as the sight of Frank coming cycled through my head, *almost* making me hard. Frank suddenly realised that his nails were digging into my back and guiltily uncurled his arm from around my waist and stepped back, supporting himself on the wall. His breath was sharp and ragged like he'd just sprinted in a race. He swept his hand through his wet hair and exhaled heavily.

He still hadn't looked at me yet. I didn't mind about that. I just stood there with a stupid smile on my face as I watched Frank's reaction. He seemed to be going through stages of disbelief, amazement, musing, embarrassment and finally shame. The shame came when he suddenly realised that he had come all over my leg and the shower hadn't gotten around to washing it off yet. He quickly glanced up at my face and then back to my leg, his cheeks betraying his feelings.

"Oh," he muttered and reached out to wash my leg. I caught his wrist and gently pushed it away; trying to non-verbally tell him it wasn't necessary.

I could tell he wasn't comfortable with the current situation. It was quite clear that I was *almost* hard and I could tell from the torn look on his face that he wasn't sure if he needed to, or wanted to, reciprocate. He looked back up at me and I shook my head, answering the question in his eyes.

"I'm so sorry," he groaned, vaguely gesturing towards my crotch.

"It's okay," I said genuinely. I wasn't expecting Frank to return the offer. I was absolutely fine with him keeping his hands to himself. I wasn't going to pressure him. I would wait for him. I would wait forever.

Frank's cheeks were still burning red as he escaped from the shower cubicle and then into the motel room. I waited until he had closed the bathroom door again before beginning to jerk myself off. It didn't take long for me to come considering how turned on Frank had made me with his moans and facial expressions. I grinned stupidly as I took a few minutes to clean myself up. I stepped out of the shower and tried to delay entering the motel room. I didn't know how Frank was going to react; would he be happy with me, or mad, or both? He was often irrational with his emotional responses so no matter how good I'd just made him feel he'd probably still be uncomfortable, maybe even humiliated.

I knew that if Frank ever decided to touch me I would probably feel incredibly self-conscious and I'd never been molested or raped. I could only imagine the conflicting thoughts running through Frank's head at the moment. What I'd done would have no doubt caused some terrible memories to resurface. I just hoped that he'd let me in.

I picked my jeans up off the floor and pulled them back on. I then picked up my shirt and smelt it quickly. I frowned at the smell and decided against putting it back on. I walked back into the motel room. Frank was sitting at the tiny table eating a sandwich. He looked over at me and his eyes seemed to linger for a brief second before he tore them away. I grabbed one of the bags from the floor and rifled through it.

"Is there a spare shirt I can wear?"

Frank turned around to look at me again and his cheeks went bright red again at the sight of my bare chest. He coughed loudly and pointed to the other bag on the floor. I looked through the other bag and pulled out the shirt Frank found at his place that was too big for him. I pulled it on and sat down on the bed, watching Frank chew thoughtfully on his sandwich.

I didn't know what to say. I didn't know whether I should ask him if he was okay, or if I should just pretend like it never happened, which was what Frank appeared to be doing. I sighed.

"Frank."

Frank looked at me expectantly. "Hmm," he said, his mouth full. He looked away again; he couldn't keep eye contact with me.

I sighed. "Never mind." I lay back down on the bed and didn't fight the tiredness that was dragging my eyelids down. Just when I had almost dropped off to sleep I vaguely felt Frank crawl up beside me in the bed.

"Hey, um, where did…you know…." He still sounded really embarrassed as though he'd just been caught masturbating by his mother or something.

"What?"

"Where did you…*learn*…how to do that?" Frank asked me uncomfortably.

I cracked open one eye. “Nowhere. I…improvised.”

Frank lay down next to me, resting his head on my shoulder. “You should patent it,” he said seriously.

I laughed. “Whatever.”

Frank got really earnest. “No, Gerard, seriously. It was….”

I pulled him in tighter and pressed my lips to his head. “Go to sleep.”

“It was amazing.”

***

I woke up to Frank shaking me. “What do you want for breakfast?” he asked. I grunted and rolled over. Frank shook me even harder. “Well?”

“Surprise me,” I mumbled and Frank sighed.

“Fine,” he said and I felt him crawl off the bed. “I’ll be back,” he said and I heard the door slam. I kept my eyes shut and tried to fall back asleep to no avail. I reluctantly opened my eyes and stretched sleepily. I picked up the remote from the bedside table and turned it on. I wondered if I could find something decent. I slowly flicked through the channels, mindlessly sitting on each channel for several seconds.

Fuck!

I threw myself off the bed and practically flew over to the TV, my finger jabbing at the volume button. In less than a second I was staring at a picture of myself.

Why the fuck was I on the television!? What the fuck is this? Where the fuck was a headline or a newsreader when you wanted one! Did Markman sell us out?

Lines of text started appearing across the bottom of the screen and my eyes widened to the size of saucers as I read them:

GRAVE FEARS FOR THE SAFETY OF THE FIRST SON
SIX FIGURE SUM OFFERED FOR ANY INFORMATION ON WHEREABOUTS OF FIRST SON
PUBLIC EXPRESSES CONCERN OVER FIRST SON’S VIOLENT PAST

I quickly switched the channel looking for something, anything to explain what was going on. What the fuck was with all this talk about the ‘first son?’

The channel I stopped on was some early morning chat show. I turned the sound up another ten notches despite the fact that I was a foot from the screen. Two ladies were sitting on opposite sides of a desk in front of a screen with my face on it. I tried not to blink so I wouldn’t miss anything. From the text on the screen I discovered that one of the ladies was the host and the second lady was her guest, a registered psychiatrist with 35 years of experience.

The host was speaking, “…but the public does have a right to be afraid, we are talking about a mentally unstable young man with an incredibly violent past. Who knows where he is? He could be sitting outside one our schools suffering from the same delusions that led to the death of three men! Oh, and lets not forget what happened to poor little Mikey Way.”

Mikey? Michael? Were they talking about the brother I killed?

The doctor was shaking her head much to host’s displeasure. “Surely you can’t be denying what Gerard did, doctor?” the host said heatedly. “It was murder.”

The doctor bristled at the host’s accusations. “It was not murder,” she said firmly. “Murder is the unlawful killing of another person with, and I would like to stress this, ‘malice aforethought.’ *Do not* try and tell me that Gerard Way committed murder. In fact, Gerard is as much a victim in this situation as the individuals he *unintentionally* hurt.”

“How can you say that Gerard is the victim here? I don’t see –.”

The doctor interjected, “Gerard’s life also ended that day. You are speaking as though Gerard did this tragic act of violence and is now living in a 5 star hotel in the Bahamas. No. You’re forgetting that Gerard has been locked up in a secure mental health facility for the past three years. There are people out there, *like you*, who think that because Gerard has not yet been charged with any crimes that he has not being paying for what he did. Have *you* ever been to a mental health facility?”

The host slowly shook her head. “I have not.”

“Then you don’t have a right to judge.”

The host turned to the camera and said, “We’ll be right back after this short break.”

They were talking about me and about what I did on national television. Everyone knows what I did. Who was this lady and why was she sticking up for me? I was a murderer. I killed people. That’s what a murderer does. I took a few steps back to sit on the edge of the bed, waiting desperately for the commercial to end. Why did everyone know who I am?

My heart rate sped up again as the show came back on.

“Welcome back. For those of you just joining us, today we are discussing the disappearance of President Way’s eldest son Gerard Way. We’re joined today by psychiatrist Dr. Connie Waters. Now, Doctor, just before the break we were discussing how you believe that Gerard should be considered another victim of the White House shootings?”

“Yes. I think that the doctors in charge of Gerard’s mental health failed him that night.”

“How so? They didn’t make him pull the trigger.”

“Gerard was diagnosed with Paranoid Schizophrenia when he was 15 and it was well documented that he suffers from very vivid delusions of prosecution. I’m sure most people know of the frightening episode that Gerard had at his father’s inauguration four years ago and that was unfortunately just the tip of the iceberg. Schizophrenia is an extremely fear-provoking disease for both the individual and their family. It was just Gerard’s bad luck that his father happened to be campaigning and then winning the election just as he was becoming symptomatic and so his descent into the disease was very well publicised.”

I frowned. This didn’t sound like me at all. What the fuck is all this talk about inaugurations? And my father winning the election? I don’t remember any of this at all. Maybe they’ve got me mixed up with someone else? That must be it.

“Now I’ve never had a chance to talk to Gerard but I do know that Gerard has delusions and hallucinations about being hunted by a secret organisation and of a retired army general who helps him evade capture. Gerard was having these delusions before the White House Shootings and still to this day. I can say in full confidence that wherever Gerard is, he is still terrified about being found by this

organisation."

How *the fuck* did she know that? Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. It wasn't a delusion. It was real. Jasper was real. He's saved me more times than I could count. You don't see things that aren't real. Fuck. I wanted to shut the television off but I couldn't. I needed to know what other lies they were spreading about me.

The host leant forward, obviously interested. "But how does this show that Gerard was failed that night, as you mentioned earlier?"

The doctor nodded again. "Let me just explain a bit more. Once Gerard was diagnosed he was put onto anti-psychotics and underwent therapy as a method of treatment and management for the illness. It was in this period that his delusions and hallucinations ceased, he became completely lucid and accepting of his condition. He essentially became practically asymptomatic. Yet, despite these glowing reports in his medical files, Gerard relapsed and had an episode that lead to the death of three men. I can almost guarantee that Gerard didn't relapse in the space of an hour. I think that Gerard had been showing signs of deterioration for weeks. Maybe his army friend had reappeared, or maybe the old familiar paranoid thoughts started creeping back."

The host was staring intently at the doctor. "Why didn't anyone do anything?" she asked. "If he was showing signs of deterioration early, why didn't anyone stop him before he felt compelled to pick up a gun?"

"I don't know," the doctor said honestly. "I have no clue why no one realised. Gerard is an incredibly intelligent person and if he was as lucid as the doctors claimed, he would've told someone, *without a doubt*, that the poisonous thoughts were returning. The question is why did that person that he told not do something?"

"Did his doctors ever say anything?"

"Of course they did!" the doctor claimed, "but it was the biggest load of trash I'd ever heard. In fact, in the weeks leading up to the shootings Gerard wasn't even under the care of his regular doctor. His regular full-time doctor was Dr. Jillian Markman but she handed his case over to Dr. Jared Leto following the death of her daughter. Who knows, maybe she didn't hand over the case properly, maybe she failed to mention to Dr. Leto that Gerard was becoming symptomatic again or maybe Dr. Leto couldn't see the signs over the size of his ego?

Who knows? All I know is that they failed to help Gerard when he needed it the most and look what happened."

"So you think they were both to blame for what happened?"

"I think they need to take responsibility for their part in it, yes."

"Which they haven't done?"

"Not as of yet, no."

The commercials flicked on and I took a breath for the first time in what felt like five minutes. They were talking about me. They were explaining everything to me. This show was telling me everything that Markman had been keeping from me for three years. It made so much sense. Maybe I really was crazy. But maybe it wasn't my fault. Could I really relieve my conscience by blaming Markman and Dr. Leto for what I did? Was that even fair?

I resumed my standing two feet from the television again as the commercials dragged on. Fucking hell. I didn't care about toilet cleaners.

"Now, Dr. Waters, was it ever revealed what happened that night in the White House? The only information I ever found out was that Gerard suffered from a delusion that led him to believe he was in danger and that he needed to protect himself, which he did with the gun. I'm just confused as to how Mikey got caught up in the crossfire."

I stared at Dr. Waters' mouth willing her to speak and to tell me the answer. I didn't remember what I'd done that night and this might be the only opportunity I had to find out.

"That's essentially all that happened. Gerard came to the conclusion that the organisation that was hunting him had found him and they had soldiers inside the building. He incapacitated one of the agents in the room with him and stole the agent's automatic weapon. Then he went looking for Mikey to, as he quoted on the night to his father, 'save him'. Along the way he opened fired on what he believed to be a group of soldiers but who were actually other agents. I believe that he took these agent's weapons and continued on his frantic search for Mikey. When he got to Mikey's room he discovered it to be empty and then he made his way back into the main hallway of the North Wing. In this hallway he found Mikey and Mikey's bodyguard who had heard the previous shots. As far as I'm aware he did not see either of them as a threat but instead continued to hallucinate that the soldiers were

sneaking up behind them to steal his brother from him. And, of course if you combine a petrified young man with an automatic weapon and a target…."

"So he opened fired on the soldiers?"

"Yes."

"And Mikey and his bodyguard got caught in the crossfire?"

"Correct."

"Oh dear lord."

Oh my god.

"Gerard was found by his parents clutching Mikey's body in several litres of pooled blood belonging to the slain bodyguard. Gerard kept telling everyone that all he was doing was trying to 'save him.' Now the next part is a little vague on details but I believe what happened then was that Gerard began to retreat back towards the staircase threatening violence towards himself due to the realisation of what he had done. In order to disarm Gerard, another agent fired at him striking him in the shoulder, which successfully caused Gerard to drop the weapon but then the impact caused him to step backwards and fall down the stairs."

The host had her hands over her mouth as she gaped at the doctor. I turned and ran for the tiny kitchen sink and vomited the entire contents of my stomach. All that blood in the dream. The dream when I was walking around a massive white house. The dream where the walls were dripping with blood and the floor was covered in it. The dream where I had blood on my hands and couldn't comprehend why. It wasn't a dream. It's what had happened in real life. That blood was all over the ground from the men I had shot and killed in the hallway of the North Wing of the White House. I did have blood on my hands.

Over the sounds of my retching I heard snippets of the conversation.

"– lucky to be alive considering the severity of the injury. In fact, it was a medical miracle that he came out of that coma with nothing more than amnesia."

I retched again, my throat burning fiercely. It was not lucky that I came out of that coma at all. I should've died. I deserved to die. It was due to me that all those people died and were injured. I was defective.

“ – no recollection of the event whatsoever.”

I turned around to watch the screen again, clutching the bench for support. My legs felt weak and my head was spinning painfully.

“I thought they said that Gerard had some sort of underlying brain damage?” the host asked and my interest seemed to increase 100 fold. This is what I wanted to know. Was there something wrong with my brain? I couldn’t keep my secrets in here if that was true. Would she tell me what Markman wouldn’t? “Wouldn’t such a traumatic brain injury have some sort of lingering consequence?”

The doctor looked dubious. “There have been rumours but nothing was ever proven. Severe head traumas often lead to other potentially fatal conditions.”

“Such as?”

The doctor thought for a moment. “Intracranial bleeding, seizures, cerebral aneurysms.”

I turned around to retch into the sink again. Was that was wrong with my head? What were those things? I didn’t even know what the fuck a cerebral aneurysm or that intra-something bleeding was.

“What about other things?”

The doctor looked pleased that the host was asking her this question. “Well,” she said, “in my experience working with people who had suffered brain trauma, any number of minor side effects are noticed. Such examples include things such as vision, motor skills, inappropriate or inadequate emotional responses to situations, depression and aggression. It’s highly variable. Though, perhaps the most common side effect is the memory loss, something we mentioned that Gerard has suffered from for the past three years. His memory loss is partly why no proper case has been taken out against him – we simply don’t know exactly what happened and he can’t tell us.”

I didn’t hear the door open and close and it was only when I turned back around to watch the screen that I saw Frank standing next to the TV the most horrified and devastated look on his face.

“You weren’t supposed to find out like this,” he said, dropping the bags he was carrying and running over to me.

My eyes seemed to be tearing up, much to my disgust. “You knew?” I

whispered.

“I figured out who you were and asked Markman.”

“B-but…why would she tell you…but not me?”

Frank looked like he was going to cry too. “Because she didn’t want you to have to deal with it. Gerard, you were better off not knowing.”

“Now, in slightly more cheerful news, Mikey Way celebrates his sixteenth birthday next week and doctors have announced that he’s likely to be discharged from hospital within the next month.” The host was speaking to the camera again and I struggled to comprehend what she was saying. Was she talking about Mikey, my brother Mikey? The Mikey I shot and killed. Did Mikey not die?! Did I not kill my brother?

I glanced at Frank and he seemed to be as equally stunned as me. “He’s alive,” I forced out.

“I didn’t know,” Frank insisted clutching my arm. “I swear I would’ve told you if I knew. Gerard, you believe me, right?”

There was only thing I knew I could do in this situation. I gently detached Frank from my arm. “Wait here,” I told him and grabbed a handful of coins from the table.

“Where are you going?” Frank asked worriedly as I headed out the door.

“I’ll be back in five minutes,” I told him. “Get all our stuff together. We’re leaving when I get back.”

Frank nodded, bewildered and I left the room, pulling the door shut behind me. I ran down the stairs and across the road to the pay phone on the side of the road. I slid inside the box and picked up the receiver and fed several coins into the slot. Once I got a dial tone I dialled: 594-113-4212.

Fucking bitch has got a lot of explaining to do.

“Hello.”

“You let me think he was dead,” I snarled down the phone as viciously as I could.

There was a brief silence before I heard Markman sigh. “Gerard.”

“He’s not dead,” I hissed. “They said on the television he’s going to be sixteen next week. You lied to me. YOU LIED TO ME! YOU LET ME THINK I KILLED HIM!”

“Gerard, did they say anything else about Mikey?”

“They said they’re going to release him from hospital. Why? Is that important?”

“They didn’t say *anything* else about him?”

“No. Why? What should they have said?”

“Gerard –.”

“I want to see him. Tell me where he is. I want to talk to him. I need to apologise. I need –.”

“Gerard, where are you?”

“Where is he?” If she didn’t tell me where he was then I would find him myself. I would find him.

“Where are you? I’ll come and get you.”

I smashed the receiver against the plastic window in anger. I took a few deep breaths before putting it back to my ear. “You were the one who let us leave in the first place.”

“Well, that was a seriously bad decision on my part, wasn’t it?”

“No, it wasn’t. I almost fixed him.”

“Frank? Are you still with him?”

“I’m looking after him, its okay,” I reassured her.

“And who’s looking after you, Gerard?”

“I don’t need anyone to look after me,” I told her. It’s true; I’ve looked after myself for the past three years. I didn’t need to be looked after. My job was to look after Frank. He was the broken one.

Markman went silent for a second. “Everybody needs someone to look after them. I’m sorry that I couldn’t do that for you, Gerard.”

Markman sounded very emotional. I hope she didn’t start to cry. I

didn't like to deal with crying women. "It's okay. I don't think it was anyone's fault," I said. "I can't help being crazy."

"Gerard, you're not crazy."

My phone credit expired just as a tear trickled down my cheek. Into the silent receiver I said, "Yes, I am."

…And then your life isn't your own anymore

I was worried that staring at Jasper might cause my brain to revolt. What if all the crazy, damaged cells in my brain overthrew all the sane cells? Would all my chances of regaining some sort of mental dignity disappear? What would happen to all of my sane cells? Would they be forced into apoptosis?

There was something cruelly ironic about admitting you're crazy and then turning around to see the physical manifestation of your insanity knocking on the window of the phone booth you were standing in. I was afraid that if I acknowledged that Jasper was there I would lose my remaining sane cells.

It sounded completely feasible, thus I would ignore him.

I pushed open the door and stepped out.

"What the heck are you doing standing out in the middle of the street," Jasper hissed, trying to grab hold of me.

Now, normally, I would've flinched or reacted when Jasper reached for my arm. But reacting to his touch would mean I was acknowledging his presence, so I did nothing.

"Gerard," Jasper said angrily, his concerned façade dropping instantly.

Not real. I crossed the street.

Not real. I entered the motel parking lot and headed toward the stairs.

Not real. I set one foot on the bottom step.

"Oh, fuck!" It was hard to ignore someone when they smack you violently around the back of the head. "What the fuck did you do that for?!" I exclaimed before I could help myself.

Damn it.

Jasper knew he had my full attention. "Come with me," he said and glanced around.

I shook my arm out of his grasp. "Absolutely not," I said. Fucking hell, I was supposed to be ignoring him, not encouraging him.

“It’s about Frank.” Jasper knew the perfect thing to say to get my undivided attention. I sighed angrily at myself and reluctantly followed him towards the pool area. As soon as he tells me whatever he had to tell me about Frank I would leave and ignore him.

“I don’t really know how to say this…,” Jasper said feigning anxiety.

I scowled. “Just fucking spit it out.”

Jasper didn’t look pleased at my attitude. “If you don’t want my help, I’ll –.”

“Leave?” I said spitefully, finished his sentence. “What’s that? You’ll leave? Where will you go? Back inside my head?”

“What are you talking about?”

I leant forward and poked Jasper hard in the chest. “See this?” I said and pressed down onto his body. “This isn’t real. I made you up. You’re not real. You’re just some stupid delusion I made up.” As I jabbed Jasper I couldn’t help but wonder if a delusion was meant to be feel as real as someone who wasn’t a delusion. His flesh felt as firm and real as Frank’s and Frank wasn’t a delusion. Unless….

I mentally smacked myself. Frank was not a delusion. I didn’t make him up. I’d seen other people interacting with him. Markman acknowledged his presence and she was a shrink. So, he must be real. Okay. Fuck.

I had scared myself shitless for a good ten seconds thinking about Frank.

Jasper seemed strangely placid, considering I’d just accused him of being a delusion. He shook his head. “If you hadn’t run away I would’ve been able to stop this. He’s brainwashed you.”

If Jasper was a delusion that I created, then why the fuck was he saying things that I didn’t know the answer to and speaking about things I didn’t understand?

“Gerard, Frank is one of *them*.” Could I detect a hint of glee in his voice?

“Ha!” I said triumphantly. “No, he’s not. We’ve been through this. I cleared him!” Jasper scowled at my declaration.

I stalked away from the pool and back towards the steps. I told Frank I would be back in five minutes and it had already been at least ten. I didn't want to keep him waiting any longer. Just as I reached the motel room door Jasper grasped my forearm painfully. "This is a mistake. You are going to die."

"Let go!" I hissed and struggled against his grip.

Jasper reluctantly released my arm and I cradled it in close to my body. "When they come for you, I will stand and watch. I will watch you die, Gerard. I swear. You don't deserve to live. I will watch you die, Gerard." I knew he wasn't joking. I knew he was serious. It made my mouth go dry.

"They'll *never* get me," I muttered, my hand clutching at the door handle and trying to use it to support my quivering knees.

Jasper had a murderous look on his face. "They will."

"No, they won't," I retorted savagely. I felt a sudden surge of defiance swell up inside me. Jasper was about to snarl something else at me but he was interrupted by Frank pulling the door open. I let go of the handle and glanced sheepishly at Frank and then glared menacingly at Jasper. Fucking dickhead.

"Who are you…," Frank began and stuck his head out the door. He went very pale when he realised there was no one there in the corridor except for me. Well, Jasper was there, but I didn't think that Frank could see Jasper. "…talking to?" Frank finished very quietly, looking at me anxiously.

"No one," I said shortly and protectively pushed Frank back inside the room. I followed him inside and took one last look at Jasper before shutting the door. The split second before Jasper and I broke eye contact he smirked.

Frank knew I was lying. I could see it in the sudden drastic change in his body language. He was standing away from me, his arms wrapped around his chest. "Gerard," he said softly.

I knew what he was going to say. Except this time he didn't have to say it. I already knew it. I was crazy. I was dangerous. Being crazy made me kill people. That's why everyone was so desperate to get me back – they didn't want me to kill anyone else.

"Let's go," I ordered and swept our tiny pile of belongings into one of

the bags. I distinctly remembered telling Frank to pack up our stuff so we could leave as soon as I came back. “Frank?” I said crossly, getting slightly annoyed at his lack of assistance. I glanced up at him and he was still frozen. But he wasn’t staring at me; he was staring at the TV which was still tuned to the same program that told me I was a cold-blooded murdering lunatic with an imaginary retired army general as a friend. To Frank, it was probably just an unpleasant reminder about just the man he had shared a bed with last night. I didn’t care what it was making him think so as long as he didn’t leave me.

“Frank,” I said and grabbed him by the arm. He didn’t resist and let me pull him out of the motel room and down the stairs. I ignored Jasper who was making lewd comments about my impending death. As I marched down the street towards the train station I couldn’t help but think about what had caused Jasper’s sudden change in character. Well, I guess it wasn’t really sudden. He had been acting like a dickhead for a while now.

As I glanced back to make sure Frank was still following me I had a sudden epiphany. All of Jasper’s shit has started after Frank’s arrival. Holy shit, Jasper was jealous of Frank. My lip curled slightly as I thought about it. I glanced back at Frank again and he frowned at the smile on the face.

“What’s so funny?” he grumbled.

I wondered if I should say it. Yes, Frank deserved to know. “I think Jasper’s jealous of you,” I said.

Frank froze again, his eyes as wide as saucers. I pulled at him encouragingly. “It’s okay,” I reassured him. “I know he’s not real. I just thought it was funny.”

Frank didn’t know how to react. He just shot me a wary look and I noticed that the distance between us had increased by another foot. Maybe telling Frank wasn’t such a good idea. Oh well, it’s not the craziest thing I’d ever said to him.

We reached the train station and I grabbed a paper timetable to study. “I need to pee,” Frank announced suddenly and looked around for a bathroom.

“Mmkay,” I said and tried to fool myself into thinking that I knew how to read the jumble of words and numbers that was the train schedule.

I realised that Frank hadn’t left for the bathroom yet and I glanced at

him. He was looking expectantly at me, as though waiting for me to say something. “Huh? Oh. *Oh*. Yeah, actually, I need to pee too,” I said hastily and Frank looked relieved. “I’ll come with you.”

I felt guilty for expecting that Frank would be comfortable going to the men’s bathroom by himself. I knew nothing was going to happen but Frank didn’t think that way. Well, he didn’t think that way *anymore*. Not after…. I followed Frank into the public bathroom and cringed. I hated these places. Fucking disgusting. I was glad that I didn’t actually need to pee and would not be touching anything in this place. Frank seemed to be thinking the same way. His face actually looked pained as he stepped gingerly over the rubbish that littered the floor towards one of the urinals.

I heard the door open as someone entered and I turned to look. I suddenly wished I had put on a cap or something as a vague look of recognition crossed the security guard’s face. Frank must’ve seen it too because in an instant he was by my side and was rushing me from the foul smelling place. We had barely gotten past the guard when he grabbed the backpack I was carrying. “Hang on,” he demanded. “What have you got in there?”

“We’re going to miss our train,” Frank tried to explain and tried to pull my pack from the man’s grasp. Most of our money was in that bag and there was no way we could leave without it. “Please, sir,” Frank begged.

The guard let go of the bag but only to focus his attention on me. I didn’t wait around for the man to realise who I was; I smashed open the bathroom door and ran back out onto the platform. A train had just pulled into the station and Frank urgently hit the button that would open the door. I glanced back at the bathroom and saw that the guard had stepped outside. My stomach dropped as I realised he was speaking into a radio clipped onto his shoulder. What was he saying? Was he telling his colleagues that he had just found Gerard Way: murderer/first son/crazy person? Frank grabbed my hand and my attention returned to the train and to not tripping over the large gap between the platform and the door. I frowned as Frank pulled me over the gap and onto the train. That gap really was dangerous. Someone should do something about that. You could lose a baby down there.

Nobody looked at us. They were all too caught up in their own worlds to notice that we had even entered their midst. The train set off almost immediately and it appeared as though the guard had done nothing. I knew that wasn’t true though. I wondered if spooks would

be waiting at the next stop to arrest Frank and I and separate us forever.

A pre-recorded voice came on over the intercom to announce the next train station we were two minutes away from pulling in to. As the train slowed down, Frank nodded at me and we got off. I glanced around. I couldn't see any spooks, just a few school kids and a few women on their way to work. I sighed in relief.

"Gerard," Frank hissed, standing in the doorway of another train. My eyes widened as I realised I needed to pay more attention or I could get lost. As I joined Frank on the train I began to wonder about what I would do if I got lost. It wasn't like I could go to the nearest security guard and ask him to call my parents to come pick me up. Why would I ask my parents to pick me up when I haven't heard from them in three years? They obviously didn't love me anymore. Not after what I'd done. Why should they? In fact, I'd probably have more luck with Markman.

At least Markman hadn't abandoned me after what I'd done. The lady on the chat show this morning said that Markman had been my doctor before I'd hurt Michael. And, now, three years later, she was still around. Perhaps I should give that devil woman more credit. She was probably the only person in the world, other than Frank, who cared about me. It took a lot of effort not to get a little teary about how fucking pathetic my life was.

I forced myself to pay attention as Frank nudged me to tell me we were train hopping again. We ran across the platform and just managed to jump aboard another train before the doors shut. I felt rather guilty about not paying for any of these train rides but Frank refused to waste time paying fares. I didn't care, I was just nervous about some ticket collector arresting us for fare evasion. I wasn't quite sure if trains these days even had ticket collectors or if they were even allowed to arrest people. That didn't matter – what mattered is paying attention.

I swore as Frank leapt out of the train after only five minutes. He was standing on the platform, looking around earnestly for another train to board. I touched his hand. "Frank, stop for a minute."

Frank obeyed. He glanced up at me and frowned. "Why aren't you wearing your hat?" he snapped as though he'd only just noticed my lack of headwear.

I blinked at him. “Um….”

Frank scowled and pulled out the cap we’d taken from his house that had the mining company logo on it. “Put it on,” he instructed.

I began to protest and Frank’s face grew black with anger. “Gerard,” he said furiously and smacked me hard on the arm. “That guard recognised you!”

“Yeah, but its okay,” I said hurriedly, ignoring the pain Frank had just inflicted upon me. Fuck, he can hit hard. “He’s gone. We’re safe.”

Frank pursed his lips. “What if we hadn’t gotten away? I won’t let them take you away from me,” he said firmly and marched off. We walked for almost 35 mins down the busy city street looking for a cheap motel. Frank walked next to me, his hand holding onto my arm for dear life. I don’t think he wanted me to get lost either. Finally, Frank picked a motel that looked respectable and sent me inside. His last minute instructions echoed in my head: “Don’t make too much eye contact. Keep your hat on. Make it quick. Use a realistic fake name!”

I was in and out of reception in only five minutes. Frank looked pleased at my effort and even more pleased at the room I’d gotten. As soon as I’d sat down on the edge of the bed, Frank leapt up onto the bed behind me and started messing up my hair. I ducked away from his fiddling fingers self-consciously.

“I think we need to cut this,” he said, ignoring my attempts to make him stop.

“No!” I said horrified and stood up, smoothing my long hair down protectively.

Frank looked disappointed. “Gerard, it’s too recognisable. Your face is on every single television station and your hair is the most noticeable thing. Even if we just cut it to be as short as mine…maybe we could bleach it?!” He sounded far too excited at the prospect of mutilating my hair. I thought it sounded like a terrible idea. I’d had short hair before and it didn’t suit me. It made my face look fat. And I couldn’t even imagine the disaster that would result from the bleaching. I’d be ugly. Frank would take one look at me and leave me. Why stay with a crazy murderer if they’re not even pretty anymore? My eyebrows wouldn’t match either!

Frank finally noticed the horrified look on my face. He became

slightly more sombre. “Gerard, it’s –.”

“Fine,” I interjected. “Whatever. Do what you want.”

Frank didn’t look hurt like I’d expected him too. In fact, he smiled at me. “It’ll look great, I promise,” he said eagerly. His stupid eagerness made it hard to be resentful of the idea. “You’ll look like a gentleman,” Frank said dreamily. Yeah, he fucking went all dreamy as he said it, like he was a 12-year-old girl.

I touched my greasy hair awkwardly. Did Frank not like this?

“Gerard,” Frank began seriously but I interrupted him.

“Okay. Fine. But no bleach.” Frank nodded keenly and smiled again. I heaved a resentful sigh and headed into the bathroom to check if they had any shampoo. “What were you going to say?” I called back.

Frank didn’t reply. I walked back out of the bathroom to see him staring at me. He was biting his lip restlessly. “Will you….” Frank began to speak but he stopped himself. “Do you- would you…. Ugh. Gerard.” He seemed to be having some sort of internal war over whether he should continue the sentence. I didn’t move or say a word. Eventually he spoke again. “You know what,” he said, faking a smile, “Never mind. It was a stupid idea. I’m gonna go buy some scissors. I’ll be back soon.”

I watched him leave, perplexed by the mood swings he’d been having all morning. He was stressing over something. It was something very big, something that was making him nervous and twitchy. He probably thought I hadn’t noticed. But I had. Of course I’d noticed. Frank could never get anything past me. I knew that asking him about it would be useless. He wouldn’t tell me. He needed to get it out on his own terms.

My stomach suddenly alerted me to the fact that I never fed it breakfast by churning painfully. I searched through Frank’s bag and pulled out the breakfast he had bought this morning. I ate the pastry thoughtfully, debating over whether to turn on the television or not. I knew we hadn’t migrated very far from the previous town we’d stayed the night in and I was worried about how safe we really were. If that guard had recognised me, he could’ve alerted the authorities and they could be combing every motel in every town within a train ride radius by now. Hell, they could be walking up the steps right now because the motel owner sold us out for an ‘undisclosed six-figure sum.’

I switched on the TV and blanched as my face immediately came into focus. I wasn't used to being a 'somebody'. Fuck my dad and his ambitions. Why couldn't I be someone else's child? Why couldn't I be the child of someone who wasn't too busy running the fucking country to visit his son?

I flicked through the channels until I saw something resembling a respectable news program. I turned the volume up and sat down to wait for something new. I pulled Frank's backpack closer to me and rifled through it. I pulled out the bottle of pills Frank and I had fought over yesterday and set them down on the bed in front of me. I studied them. Would they really stop all the thoughts like Frank suggested? Would they really make Jasper go away? Would they make *Them* go away? It seemed too good to be true.

"In breaking news –." My head snapped up and all thoughts of the pills disappeared from my mind. "First Son Gerard Way was spotted four hours ago at a train station is Greenville, Ohio. A security guard tried unsuccessfully to apprehend Way and alerted authorities to the sighting just after 7:55am. Doctors have reiterated their grave concerns for Way's deteriorating health and his ability to function safely and productively within the community. Way is believed to still be within the Miami Valley area which includes the Ohio communities of Dayton, Springfield, Middletown and Hamilton. The reward for information that leads to the successful detainment of Way has risen to three million dollars overnight."

Whoa, three million dollars. Maybe I should hand myself in and give the money to Frank. Was I really that important? I didn't understand. Were they offering such a ridiculous reward because I was important, or because I was dangerous? What if I was dangerous? What if did to Frank what I did to Mikey? I couldn't hurt Frank. It was not an option. I was here to fix Frank. I picked up the bottle of pills I had abandoned and quickly unscrewed the lid. Before I could talk myself out of it I tipped out a solitary tablet and swallowed it dry.

What the fuck had I done!? I instantly panicked and shoved my fingers down my throat as I ran to the sink. I retched violently several times before forcing myself to stop. I slid down the wall, tears threatening to spill from my eyes. How fucking pathetic. I rubbed my eyes furiously, determined to make sure I wasn't crying when Frank came back. I wasn't allowed to cry. I was the strong one. I needed to be strong for Frank. I needed to fix him.

I swear I could feel that tablet dissolving in my stomach. I almost

drove myself crazy thinking of the drug being released into my blood stream and being pumped around my body.

I was still sitting on the floor under the sink when Frank came back. He looked at me worriedly but I weakly waved his concerns away. The news program was onto the weather now. There had been no mention of the phone call I'd made to Markman this morning. Had she not told anyone? Had she kept it a secret?

Frank came to sit next me. "I'm sharing a room with a man who the Government decided was worth three million dollars," he said darkly.

I didn't understand why he was bringing that up. He was thinking of turning me in? Surely Frank wouldn't give me up for three million dollars? No. "Huh?" I grunted casually, pretending not to be terrified at what the answer could be.

Frank scowled. "You can't put a price on someone, Gerard. It's rude. People should want to help you because they care about you and your well-being, not because they're going to get paid."

"I agree," I said immediately.

Frank stood back up and grabbed a towel from the bathroom. He spread it over the floor and set a chair in the middle of the towel. "Sit here," he ordered and pointed to the chair. I straddled the chair, feeling pangs of irrational fear as I thought about the impending haircut. Frank grabbed the collar of my shirt and made a noise of disapproval. "Take your shirt off, your collar is too high for me to do this properly," he instructed as he filled a spray bottle with water from the tap.

I obediently pulled my shirt off and sat very still as Frank grabbed a chunk of my hair. "Have you ever done this before?" I asked nonchalantly as Frank hacked the chunk off.

"No."

I swallowed painfully. "Oh," I forced out.

"Is that going to be a problem, Gerard?" Frank replied teasingly.

"Uh, no," I said unconvincingly as Frank dropped another chunk of hair onto the towel at my feet.

"I'll make you look beautiful, trust me," he said happily. He paused

and added, “Wait, even *more* beautiful!”

It took a quarter of an hour for Frank to destroy my hair. Well, at least that’s what I guessed he was doing based on his method. He would start hacking at one section of hair before deciding to move onto another for a minute before returning to the previous section. At least I would be unrecognisable, which was a good thing?

Eventually Frank stepped back and surveyed his work. “I love it,” he declared. “Go. Look,” he said shooing me off toward the bathroom.

I studied myself in the mirror. It wasn’t terrible but it wasn’t very good either. I spent a few minutes trying to style it but to no avail. I forced myself to smile as I walked out of the bathroom to face Frank. I scratched my bare back which was covered in bits of my hacked off hair. I really needed to have a shower.

Frank saw through my smile immediately. “You don’t like it,” he said sadly.

“Do you like it?” I asked. He nodded. I nodded in agreement. “Then I like it too. But right now I need a shower.”

Frank nodded again and I walked back to the bathroom. I shut the door and dropped my pants trying not to think about the last time I was in a shower. I couldn’t help but grin as I remembered Frank’s face. I took my time showering and then, when I was done, I wasted another 10 minutes in another attempt to style my hair. It didn’t look too bad when it was wet and plastered to my neck. I pulled my jeans back on and walked back into the motel room to grab my shirt.

As soon as I exited the bathroom there was a flurry of movement from Frank. I wasn’t quite sure but I thought I’d seen him stuff a piece of paper down his shirt. I raised an eyebrow at him as I collected my shirt but he just shrugged. He looked away, avoiding my piercing gaze. I sat down next to him on the bed and he held up the bottle of pills I had abandoned on the sheets in my haste to induce a bout of vomiting.

“What were you doing with these?” he asked tentatively. I knew he didn’t want another repeat of yesterday’s fight.

“I’ll tell you if you tell me what was on the piece of paper you hid down your shirt,” I said.

He pressed his lips together guiltily and dropped his gaze to the

obvious bulge against his chest. He sighed and pulled it out. “Please don’t be mad,” he begged. I gently pried the paper out of his hands. “Please,” he repeated desperately as I read it.

I’d seen this piece of paper twice before. The first time was when I wrote it and the second time was when Frank used it to convince me to kiss him. I was holding the paper upon which I had written one of my theories about losing and replacing memories. “Why do you have this?” I asked. I wasn’t angry but more intrigued. I thought I’d satisfied Frank’s curiosity in the area by replacing his first kiss memory.

Frank seemed relieved that I wasn’t mad. It was evident in his body language. He unconsciously moved closer towards me. “I was just rereading it to see if I’d missed anything.”

“Oh.” I wasn’t convinced that Frank was telling me the whole truth.

“Can you tell me more about replacing memories?” he asked. His eyes were filled with some sort of childish excitement as though I was about to tell him how to make Christmas happen every day.

“I told you all I know,” I lied.

Frank’s face fell. “Well you said you can replace almost anything. That’s right isn’t it, you said that?”

“Yeah, but –.”

“Like the kiss!” Frank exclaimed. “That worked!”

I didn’t like where this was going. Frank looked like he was on the verge of bursting into tears. Well, either that or imploding. He was filled with some sort of misplaced excitement. I suspected the excitement wasn’t excitement at all but terror; terror at the thing he was about to permit his brain to remember. His hands were clenched together so tightly his knuckles were white.

“So, what if it worked for things…similar to that?” He paused to bite down on his lip. A tiny spot of blood appeared but it disappeared as soon as his lips were pressed together again. He continued, “Would you help me, Gerard?”

“Help you to do what?” I asked cautiously.

“Have sex with me.” It wasn’t a question or a statement. It was a

demand. I looked into Frank's eyes and knew by the way they glistened with tears that he was remembering the first sexual experience he'd had and what had happened. "Please," he added as though that might sway my decision.

No. No. Absolutely not. Never. It would break him. I wasn't supposed to be breaking him further. I was supposed to be fixing him. Surely I wasn't supposed to fix him by performing the same act that broke him in the first place? No. That was ludicrous. No. I couldn't.

"No."

"Please. "

Frank's quiet desperation broke my heart. I felt a stabbing pain in my chest and I knew it was my heart breaking. I couldn't bear to see him like this. I was going to be strong.

"No."

Frank didn't say a word. He stood up slowly and walked over to the bathroom, shutting himself inside. I heard the lock click as Frank separated himself from me. I didn't follow him. I gave him some space.

Frank didn't come back out. He had been in there for almost three hours. I could've popped the lock on the door with a quarter but resisted the urge to check on him. I used the time to think. Was I just a toy to him? Was I just a way for him to feel better about himself? Was that why he never told me he loved me? Maybe he didn't love me. Maybe all he wanted was for me to fix him so he could leave me and find someone else. Someone else who wasn't crazy.

But if that's what Frank wanted then I would give it to him. I wanted him to be happy.

I sat down next to the door. "Yes," I said.

The door opened straight away. "Don't fuck with me, Gerard," he said menacingly.

I shook my head. "If that's what you want to do, then I'll do it."

He dropped to my side and grabbed my hands. "I *trust* you," he insisted. "Now? Do you want to do it now?"

I shook my head. “No. You have to wait 24 hours.”

Frank dropped my hands, his face sullen. “What?”

“I want you to think about it.”

Frank jumped to his feet and stepped over me. He stood in the centre of the room and waved his arms at me. “Do you think I *haven’t* thought about it? Do you think I haven’t agonised about it? Do you think I just decided to ask you on a whim?” he said incredulously.

I shook my head. “Of course not. But, I want you to think about it *knowing* that it’s going to happen.” I checked the time on the clock by the bed. “At 4 o’clock tomorrow afternoon I will have sex with you Frank. Okay? I want you think about that fact. Not the possibility. I will have sex with you unless you tell me you don’t want to.”

Frank suddenly looked very nervous and he glanced at the clock. “Good,” he said apprehensively. “Okay. 4pm. Got it.” He checked the clock again as it clicked over to 4:02. “Okay.”

I knew Frank would almost drive himself mad over the next 24 hours but it was the only way I could gauge an accurate representation on how sure he was about what he wanted me to do. I knew he would change his mind uncountable times. In fact I was willing to bet he’d already changed his mind at least twice in the 5 minutes since I’d told him I would do it. I know it. I know things, remember?

I then forbade Frank from talking about it until 4pm tomorrow. I wanted him to come to his final decision on his own without any influence from me.

The rest of the day passed very uneventfully. I was uneasy all night thinking about someone bursting into our room to arrest me but no one ever came. I guess the man at reception hadn’t recognised me after all. Despite this, I didn’t dare go down to reception the next morning to extend our room lease for another night. I settled on calling reception and leaving the money on our room service tray outside the door. They must’ve gotten the money because no one came to chuck us out at check out time, much to my relief.

I swear I could tell every time Frank changed his mind. It was heart breaking to watch and I felt guilty for subjecting him to it. But I needed to be sure. I needed to be sure that Frank was sure about what he was asking me to do.

Frank and I were relaxing on the bed as the TV cycled through pictures of my face every five minutes. Eventually Frank got sick of the propaganda and muted the program. I rolled over to look at him, remembering a question I wanted to ask.

“How did you know who I was?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I figured it out. It was pretty obvious, in my opinion.”

I suddenly felt very stupid. How could Frank figure out who I was in a matter of months and I not have any clue for three years? I wasn’t suggesting that Frank was stupid – I know he is intelligent. But how did Frank figure it out with his normal brain and my remarkable brain couldn’t? “How?”

He considered me. “Well, at first I didn’t know *exactly* who you were, but I figured you were important. And then when I asked Markman she confirmed my suspicions.”

“God, I feel so stupid,” I muttered, rolling onto my back to escape Frank’s gaze.

Frank touched my arm. “How could you have known? Gerard, they didn’t tell you *anything*.”

“Was it really obvious things?” I asked.

Frank looked undecided. “Not really. Okay, wait, answer this: How many orderlies can you name?”

I racked my brain, eager to name as many as I could to impress Frank. “Well, there’s Ben. And Zach.” I frowned. I couldn’t think of any others. I only interacted with those two. I told Frank this.

Frank nodded. “Exactly. Gerard, I noticed this straightaway. There are *heaps* of orderlies at Bluestone, yet only two ever interacted with you. And most of the time you were their only patient. I thought it was strange that you had your own two private orderlies. And I guess I always thought there was a reason why everyone was so nice and lenient towards you despite how much of a dickhead you were.” He smiled apologetically and took a moment to think. “Oh! Remember when we were in the rec room and that ad came on for the President’s Christmas Appeal and Zach freaked out and shut it off? It was because they didn’t know if you’d recognise your dad. That’s what got me really curious.”

I must've been walking about Bluestone blind. Now that Frank mentioned these things, they seemed to fucking obvious. Why the fuck didn't my brain pick up that Ben and Zach were always around?

"There are heaps more," Frank said, tapping his chin as he thought.

"When did you go to Markman?" I asked, wondering what other major blatantly obvious thing I'd missed.

"You remember that day you got into a fight with Bert? Well, I overheard Ben and Zach getting in really big trouble for not protecting you and for letting the fight progress that far. They were being ripped into by some official looking man in a suit. The man said something about disciplinary hearings at head office and reassessment of their commitment to the project. They kept talking and arguing over someone, I think, but they were calling him something weird – Mad Gear, I think?" He paused. "I think they were talking about you."

What the fuck? Why were they talking about me? Was Mad Gear supposed to be some sort of code name for me? What kind of lame fucking code name was Mad Gear? I wasn't fucking mad! I could've gotten something exciting like 'Batman' for fucks sake.

"That's kinda intense," I said slowly.

"Yeah." Frank went silent as I pondered.

I did remember that day I got into a fight with Bert after he'd called Frank a "faggot." I remembered Bert smashing his fist into the side of my face. I also remembered it was Ray and Bob who lifted him off me, not an orderly. The orderlies only turned up after Bert tried to strangle me. Yes, that's right, the orderlies turned up and Dr. Leto was there. They all turned up at once which made me think that they were all off somewhere together discussing something else. Discussing me and my murderous tendencies, I expect.

I sighed guiltily. Frank didn't say anything more.

4pm came a lot faster than I expected. I wouldn't say I was dreading what was about to happen. I am a guy. I do get horny. But my protective instincts towards Frank seemed to be clouding my desire. There was no way I was going to be able to get off by fucking Frank if he was crying under me. That was not an option. There was also the pressure. What if I couldn't do it? What if I couldn't perform? What if I came prematurely and disappointed Frank?

Fuck this.

“Yes.” Frank stared me straight in the eyes. “I want to do this. I waited like you wanted.”

I nodded seriously. “Okay.”

It wasn’t hard to read Frank’s face. I could vaguely see some sort of excitement but it was being downtrodden by the fear. I didn’t know where his fear was directed though. Was he afraid of me? Or was he afraid of the pain he was, perhaps irrationally, expecting. Or maybe he was afraid that it would work and he wouldn’t have to feel that way anymore. Maybe he was afraid of what else he was about to expose himself to. I didn’t know. All I know is that I was doing what Frank wanted. He *wanted* me to do this. Of course I wanted it too, but I didn’t want it to be a disaster.

“Do you think we should, I don’t know, use a condom?” I asked awkwardly. Maybe I could delay this for a little longer.

Frank went red and produced a box. He didn’t say a word and I didn’t break the silence as I accepted the box of condoms off him. It was when he handed me a tube of lube that I felt the need to clear my throat very loudly. I wish I could be better than this. I wish I was experienced. I wish I wasn’t such a fucking virgin.

“Are you okay?” Frank asked.

I nodded, ignoring the panic that was rising in my chest. “Are *you* okay?” I asked him back.

He grinned. “Yes.” He moved in close to me and kissed me encouragingly.

That one gesture seemed to calm my nerves immensely. I knew Frank was only pretending to be confident. But if he was strong enough to pretend then I would pretend too. Frank and I were good at kissing; we didn’t have to pretend about that. Maybe I’ll just focus on kissing Frank and let everything else just…happen.

Good idea, Gerard.

I reached out for Frank, returning his kiss. He lay down on the bed and I gently placed my body down on top of his, our lips never separating as we got into position. I knew I would have no trouble getting hard. I always got immensely turned on when Frank acted this

way – forceful and lustful.

Frank started pulling at my shirt. I obliged him by pulling it off and then removing his as well. I ran my hand down Frank's chest and felt proud as Frank shivered under my touch. But that seemed to be the end of any foreplay. "I wanna do it now," Frank whispered as he undid his belt and jeans. I rolled off him and pulled my own jeans off. I picked up the box of condoms and pulled one out. Thank fuck I actually already knew how to put on a condom or else Frank might actually faint at my incredible lack of experience. I know things.

I glanced sideways at Frank who was lying there with his eyes shut muttering to himself. He quickly opened his eyes as though sensing I was looking at him. "Do it," he urged and spread his legs for me. Oh fuck, that's really hot.

The panic set in again and I tried to calm myself down by taking a long moment to squeeze some lube onto my condom-covered cock. I shuffled over so I was kneeling in between Frank's legs. I knew what I was supposed to do next. It wasn't exactly difficult. It didn't help that Frank was staring at me with some sort of desperate look.

"Frank, are you absolutely sure about this?"

He nodded and I swallowed down a wave of nausea. How fucking pathetic am I? I was about to lose my virginity and yet I was acting like a fucking baby. I shuffled in closer to Frank and as I positioned my cock near his entrance he raised his hips to meet me. Still holding my cock I pushed my way inside Frank. I didn't know what was more mind blowing – the way I watched Frank stretch to accommodate my cock or the *feeling* of being inside him. It was so fucking tight. I couldn't even think of the right word to describe the pleasure I was feeling. I glanced up at Frank to check how he was. Pressing my body close to his, I pushed the rest of my cock inside Frank, watching his face intently.

He let a pained gasp escape his lips and I could feel his whole body tense even further. I touched the side of his face and he looked at me. "Are you okay?" I whispered and he nodded furiously. He was lying.

"Keep going," he said softly and turned his head to the side, his brow furrowed in discomfort and embarrassment.

I had barely slid out an inch when I saw Frank break. His body, which had been tensed so impossibly tight suddenly relaxed and he went very still under me. His face softened. I knew this was a bad thing.

Frank had given up. He was just going to lie there and let me finish because that's all he knew how to do.

In an instant I pulled out of Frank. My erection was non-existent as pulled off the condom. There was something incredibly unromantic and soul destroying about breaking your boyfriend.

"They're touching me," Frank said softly, his eyes still closed, as I sat there wondering what to do. The guilt had taken less than 30 seconds to completely consume me. "I can feel them."

I reached out and pulled Frank into my arms. He curled into me. "No, they're not," I said forcefully.

"It didn't work," he said impassively. "Why didn't it work? Gerard, it's your theory. Why didn't it work?"

I didn't reply. I just hugged Frank into my body as tight as I possibly could. "I'm so sorry," I whispered. "I'm *so* sorry." I didn't know what I was supposed to do. Frank started crying into my chest. I didn't know how to make it right. I wish I had never agreed to do this. I was supposed to be fixing him, not making him sob into my chest. I should've said no. I should never have let Frank talk me into doing this. I should've followed my instincts. I couldn't help him. I was a failure. I almost killed my brother trying to help him, and now I'd broken the love of my life trying to do that same thing.

I didn't deserve to be alive. I didn't even deserve to rot in a cell; I should get the lethal injection. Then I'll never be able to hurt anyone again.

It took me a while to realise that Frank had sobbed himself to sleep against my hairless chest. I gently laid his head down on the pillow and climbed off the bed to stretch my aching muscles. I pulled my jeans back on and sat down at the plastic table. I felt too sick to eat and too anxious about Frank's wellbeing to even think about sleeping. I made the decision to stay awake until Frank woke up so I could reassess his state of mind. I didn't want him to do something stupid. I glanced at the curtain-covered window and sighed. The sun hadn't even set yet; it was going to be a long night.

I was surprised how long Frank slept for. He must've been exhausted. I guess reliving your rape was enough to mentally exhaust anyone. He was still asleep when I accidentally dozed off with my head resting on the hard table at 3am.

Frank woke me at 6am with a determined look on his face. “I want to try again,” he announced as I blinked blearily and stretched my cramped muscles. It took a second for me to register what he had said. I almost broke down myself. He was more broken than I’d anticipated. His desperation for rescue from these poisonous and painful memories was consuming him. He seemed to think I was going to be his saviour. I wasn’t a saviour. I was crazy. I didn’t save lives I took them.

“Uh, no,” I said to Frank’s wide eyes.

Frank’s reaction made me think that he was expecting my answer. He looked deterred but was not conceding defeat. “Please. I *promise* I won’t cry this time.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Why not? Don’t you want to fuck me?”

Frank’s disregard for my feelings and for my right to a choice made me feel worthless. I felt like he was using me to satisfy his own agenda. It made my heart ache. He was using my dedication to him against me.

He knew I was in love with him. Being in love was a like taking your heart out, setting it on a table and then handing the person you love a machete and telling them, “I trust you not to do anything to it.” I’d given Frank that fucking machete and now he was inches away from hacking into me.

“I don’t like when you speak about me like that,” I mumbled, dropping my eyes to the faded carpet.

I knew Frank didn’t mean all the things he said. He was scared. He was scared that he’d have them inside him forever.

“You don’t understand,” Frank said despondently.

“What don’t I understand?”

“I will never be able to love you until they’re gone. I *want* to love you, Gerard. I want to spend the rest of my life with you but I can’t! They took something from me and it’s gone forever! A little piece of me got torn out and I’m broken now. I’m all sad and pathetic and afraid. I’m afraid that you’re going to leave me because I can’t give you what you deserve. I need to do this because it’s the only way. I *know* we can replace them if we try hard enough.”

“Frank, do you truly believe that sex is the only way to do this?”

Frank cried out in frustration. “No, Gerard, not sex. Sex is primal and harsh and…. No, it’s the intimacy I want, Gerard!”

Was that all Frank wanted all along? Sexual intimacy? I felt a surge of adrenaline and stood up. “Okay,” I said. “Let’s try again.”

Frank’s face didn’t reflect what could exactly be called happiness but there was a definite look of determination. He climbed onto the bed and looked expectantly at me.

“But,” I said.

Frank frowned.

“We’re swapping.”

Frank wasn’t frowning anymore. He just looked downright confused. I don’t think he understood what I wanted.

I pointed at Frank. “You’re going to top me.”

Frank looked like I had just asked him to stab me. He shook his head violently. “No, you don’t want that, Gerard.”

I joined Frank on the bed and kissed his forehead. “I do want it.” I wrapped my arms around him and pulled him in close to me.

He shook his head and screwed up his face like he was in pain. “No,” he whispered. “It hurts,” he breathed into my ear as I kissed down his neck. He moaned softly as I sucked softly on the hickey I had given him just a few nights ago. I broke away from him and gently tugged his shirt off before pushing him back down onto the mattress. I reattached my lips to his neck and starting kissing down past his collarbone. As I reached his nipples I spent a few moments on them. Frank was reacting just as I’d expected – consenting but slightly reserved. He knew I wasn’t going to do anything he wasn’t comfortable with. I knew he trusted me implicitly. He probably trusted me too much.

I dropped my hand down to palm Frank through his jeans. He gasped but I didn’t detect any unconscious requests to stop. For someone so broken, Frank was very easy to coax into arousal. I undid his jeans but didn’t touch him. Not yet. I checked his face. I knew his beautiful features so well. Cumulatively, I’d probably spent upwards of 100

hours staring at him and studying him. I knew how to read that face better than anyone. I knew the meaning of almost every single facial reaction Frank could produce. I know things, remember?

Before I could ask Frank if it was okay for me to touch him I felt his fingers pulling on the hem of my shirt. I sat back to pull off my shirt but as I moved to come back in closer, Frank stopped me. He reached out hesitantly towards the bulge that was my semi-hard cock. He'd never tried to touch me there before and I felt myself holding my breath as his fingers grazed the denim. Slowly he built up enough courage to cup me through my jeans and squeezed gently. Before I could stop myself I let out a low moan. Then, much to my surprise Frank began to mimic what I had been doing to him only moments earlier. His hand moved rhythmically down over my crotch. My breathing rate increased drastically as Frank became more eager. I panicked slightly as I realised I was close to coming in my pants and knew Frank had to stop. I quickly placed my hand over Frank's and removed it. He looked slightly apologetic but I wiped that look off his face by grabbing the waistband of his jeans and pulling them off in one sweep. So as to not leave Frank feeling too exposed I kicked my own jeans off.

I thought I was already fully aroused but Frank seemed to want to prove me wrong. He pushed me back down onto the bed and swung his leg over my hips. I could feel my heart thumping loudly in my ears. Slowly and hesitantly he kissed me before grinding his crotch down onto mine. I'd always thought of grinding as passionate, frantic and dirty but Frank seemed to be redefining it. His entire body was relaxed and he looked like he was truly comfortable. I think that removing the pressure of being penetrated changed him. I don't think he had even considered topping me.

Our lips seemed to crash together again desperately. It was furious and passionate and I thought I was going to die. I blindly felt for a condom and pressed it into Frank's hand. He pulled away suddenly to look at it.

Then he looked at me. "Are you sure?" he asked.

I spread my legs in reply. Frank nodded, blushing furiously. Still glowing pink he squeezed the lube onto his fingers. He glanced down at me for a second and before I could do anything he slipped one of his fingers inside me.

It was not like any sensation I'd ever felt before. I let a soft, "ah,"

escape my lips and felt myself clench down on Frank's finger. He looked up from where his finger was buried inside my arse. I couldn't help but be amused by the petrified and anxious look on his face. "I'm sorry," he said.

He obviously wasn't sorry enough because he pushed another finger in. I gasped at the sudden stab of pain. I think I had gravely underestimated how much getting fucked in the arse hurt. Frank didn't seem to know what to do with his fingers now they were inside me so he quickly pulled them out.

He slid one hand under my lower back and lined himself up at my entrance. I knew it wasn't going to be pleasant so I braced myself. I nodded once and groaned loudly as Frank pushed in. Despite the copious amount of lube Frank had used it fucking hurt. My vision went black momentarily at the intrusion. I hadn't realised how intense the sensation was going to be. It was making it hard to think.

I felt Frank bury his head in my neck. I could hear him muttering, "Oh my God," over and over as my body clenched around him in some sort of misguided attempt to expel him from inside me. I quickly lifted my legs up to wrap them around Frank's back so he was lying flush against my body. Then I used my legs to pull him the rest of the way inside me. Aw, fuck. That hurt. The further intrusion caused me to gasp. Almost immediately I began to ache as my body protested against being stretched so unnaturally.

Frank's hand shot up to grab my hair as I pulled him in. His moans were muffled but I still recognised them as being moans of pleasure. My body seemed to be adjusting to Frank because the ache that Frank had induced upon his entry was fading. It took a while for Frank to move again. I was quite content for him to lie there inside me for a while. I wasn't going to sneeze at an opportunity to get used to this painful act.

Eventually Frank lifted himself up to look at me. The arm he used to support himself was shaking. "Oh my God," he murmured and kissed me distractedly. He stopped kissing me for a second and I knew he was going to try to talk. "This is –." I stopped him with another kiss. Then, as if realising that he had a job to do, Frank tentatively began to move in and out of me. It was very slow and gentle and no more than an inch at a time. The whole time he never broke eye contact with me. I knew that it was no use trying to hide my discomfort; that wasn't fair. Instead, every time I winced Frank would kiss me protectively.

Frank's thrusts began to grow deeper as the minutes progressed. He was thrusting harder and harder and it was hurting more and more until – "fuck!" I exclaimed, my back arching off the bed. I didn't know what Frank had done but whatever it was it felt fucking fantastic.

Frank froze and stared at me with concerned eyes. "Do that again," I said, gasping as the remnants of the wave of pleasure flitted away.

He nodded, shocked that I was feeling pleasure, and began thrusting until he found the spot again. I wrapped my legs tighter around Frank's waist to try to keep him in this position. Frank's breaths were coming out in pants as he thrust forwards hitting that spot on every second to third thrust. I squirmed under Frank's sweat slicked body and knew I was going to come very soon.

The arm Frank was supporting himself on gave way suddenly and he broke our eye contact as he dropped his head to rest on my shoulder again. He grabbed my hair more forcibly this time and pressed his lips to my neck. Now that Frank was lying flush to my body again I knew I was going to come within the next 15 seconds due to the tiny fact that my cock was pressed between our sweaty bodies.

"I'm going to…," I said as my toes curled inwards as the feeling grew quickly in my groin. I felt almost ashamed of my virgin body making me come so soon.

"Yeah," I heard Frank mutter into my neck before he moaned loudly and uninhibitedly.

That was enough to send me over. I let myself go and threw my head back into the pillow as I came all over our stomachs. I felt my entire body tense and clamp down around Frank. Frank attempted to thrust once more but he couldn't hold on. As he came he uttered my name. He let out a guttural moan and said, "Gerard." Holy fuck I love him.

Everything went very silent after that. Frank's head was still resting on my chest and I watched it rise up and down as I drew deep breaths into my lungs. Eventually Frank pulled himself out and removed the used condom. He grabbed my discarded shirt and passed it to me to clean myself up with.

"You need to wash that thing anyway," he said matter-of-factly as he dropped the condom into the bin.

He lay back down next to me, his fingers grazing over a spot on my neck that was smarting. I suspected he'd done more than kiss that

spot. We settled into a comfortable silence and I could feel myself beginning to fall asleep. I had only slept for three hours that morning and losing my virginity look a lot out of me. Who knew how mentally and physically exhausting it was to lose your v-card.

“Do you think I’ll ever be able to be like you?” Frank asked softly tracing patterns on my bare chest.

“Like me?” I was confused. Like me how? He didn’t want to be like me. I was a murderer. I was crazy. I wasn’t anyone to be admired.

“I saw your face, Gerard. It was the most open and unguarded I’ve ever seen you. You handed yourself over to me, Gerard. I want to be able to do that. I want to be able to look at you the way you looked at me. Do you think I’ll ever be able to do that?”

“Yes.”

“Yes?” Frank looked at me expectantly, as though waiting for me to impart some further insight.

“One day,” I said and squeezed him comfortingly.

“One day I’ll be able to look at you in the same way?” he said hopefully.

I kissed the side of his head. “You already do.”

His cheeks went scarlet and he couldn’t think of anything to say. Eventually he settled on, “why don’t you try and get some sleep before checkout?”

I fell asleep straight away.

I was too anxious about oversleeping to sleep very well and woke up at my own accord only 2 hours later. I sat and realised with a jolt that Frank wasn’t anywhere in the room. I could see directly into the bathroom and he wasn’t there either. I noticed, with a huge flood of relief, that his backpack was still where he’d left it last night. Surely that meant he would be back?

I got dressed anxiously and packed all our stuff up as the checkout time loomed closer. Much to my annoyance and angst, Frank turned up fifteen minutes before we had to leave. He was holding a piece of paper in his hand.

“Where have you been?” I asked exasperated as I laced up my sneakers.

Frank held out the piece of paper and I accepted it warily. “What is it?” I asked.

“Read it,” Frank said breathlessly.

I scanned the paper and read it aloud. “The National Naval Medical Centre, located in Bethesda, Maryland, USA, is a federal institution – Frank, what the hell is this?”

“Keep reading,” he said, his eyes shining bright.

I sighed and kept going. “A federal institution that conducts medical and dental research as well as providing health care for American leaders, including….” My mouth went dry as my eyes jumped ahead to read the next five words.

“Including the President and his family,” Frank finished.

“You don’t think?” I said, a surge of hope running through my veins.

“They said your brother was in hospital. He *has* to be there. Maybe we can find him and –.” I cut Frank off by wrapping my arms around him and spinning him around. I set him down, grabbed his face, pressed my lips to his and kissed him in a mad frenzy.

Frank laughed as my cheeks glowed red at the thought. I could find Michael – Mikey – and I could apologise. I actually had an opportunity to make this right. For the first time ever I felt pure, unadulterated hope. Even if we couldn’t get into the hospital we could find a way to get a message to him to ask him to meet us somewhere. But would he come? Maybe he wouldn’t come. I shook my head. I wasn’t going to think about that.

I was going to find my brother.

Not With A Bang But A Whimper

I'd never really had an opportunity to understand the value of money. I'd been in a fucking mental institution for the past three years and I had no recollection of the sixteen years before that. We'd never been given money at Bluestone. There was no need. It wasn't as though there was a gift shop in the lobby selling novelty syringes and tablets or badges bearing the words, 'I survived Bluestone!' Therefore I wasn't really too fussed when Frank first told me we were running out of money. He didn't seem too concerned about it at the time so I didn't worry about it. But that was over a week ago and now I was watching as Frank frantically turned out the pockets of the nine pieces of clothing we owned between us in a desperate search for cash. At his terse request I dug into my jeans pockets and pulled out several crumpled notes. I smoothed them out as best I could on the bed and searched for the number in the corner that would tell me their value. I had two fifty dollar notes, a twenty dollar note and a single one dollar bill.

Frank snatched the money I had found off the bed and added it to the small pile on the motel room floor.

"Where did it all go?" I asked. I was ridiculously confused as to how the five thousand dollars we had bought with us from Frank's place had diminished so quickly. I didn't understand. Five thousand dollars was a lot of money.

"Motel rooms, food, train tickets, taxi fares, it all adds up, Gerard," Frank said quietly.

I felt sick. Without money we would have nowhere to sleep. There was no fucking way I was sleeping on the ground. Animals do things on the ground. Terrible, terrible things. It would also be too hard to protect Frank at night without a locked door separating us from the rest of the world. "What do we do?"

Frank didn't reply. Instead he busied himself with recounting the money for the third time.

I knew what this meant. I think this was what Markman and everyone else was waiting for. They knew we would run out of money eventually. They knew we would have to give ourselves up sooner or later.

I sighed and flopped back onto the bed, defeated. Frank joined me a moment later. He laid his head down on my shoulder and I wrapped my arm around him. It was nice to hold him and be close to him.

“Do you want to…?” Frank asked softly, turning his face in kiss my cheek.

Instantly my stomach started churning. “I don’t think so,” I replied trying to act nonchalant. The last thing I needed was for Frank to try to initiate something physical. Whenever we did it became a gigantic clusterfuck.

“What’s wrong?”

I avoided looking at his wide eyes and shrugged. “Nothing. I’m just not in the mood.”

“’Kay,” he said faintly.

I was running out of excuses. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to have sex with Frank; it was that I was terrified of hurting him again. We’d tried to reproduce our first time again twice now and both times had ended in tears. The first time involved Frank wanting to try bottoming again. That was a fucking disaster at the very least. I hadn’t even got to the point of entering him when he lost it. The second time saw *me* bottoming but Frank ended up being too anxious and emotional about the whole ordeal and then too upset over the pained faces I was making to sustain his erection. That one ended in tears of frustration on his part and an hour of self-deprecation.

It was fucking exhausting.

I didn’t quite understand why Frank felt like we *needed* to do it. I’d tried explaining to him that there were other ways to have sex that didn’t involve penetration but he refused to give up on the idea. He’d become obsessed with the whole concept of replacing his memories. It was my fault that he was acting this way. If I’d never explained my concept to him all those months ago back in the infirmary at Bluestone we wouldn’t be in this position today.

The soft sound of sirens filled my ears and I tensed instantly. In my arms, Frank did the same. It sounded like the sirens were coming closer and my palms started sweating as the noise got louder. What if they were coming to the motel right now to arrest me and send me to prison? The noise of the sirens peaked and I tried to convince myself that they belonged to an ambulance or a fire engine. Then, to my

relief the sirens began to fade again until they were gone completely.

Frank climbed off the bed and peaked through a gap in the curtains. “They’re gone,” he said and shot a look at me. “You can relax.”

I frowned. I was relaxed. I felt like I was on a fucking vacation. Well, the type of vacation where you can’t stay in one spot for more than a night and the whole country was looking for you so they could cash in on a multi-million dollar reward. I sat up and folded my arms tightly across my chest. Frank stared at me for a few more seconds and then returned to peeking out the window.

“What was that?”

“What was what?” he asked.

“That look?”

“What look?” Frank turned to raise an eyebrow at me.

I studied his face. Nope, it was gone. I don’t know if I had imagined it or not but somehow I thought I’d seen the ‘holy fuck, you’re so beautiful, I love you’ look that I’d sent him numerous times before. I was probably wrong. I wasn’t convinced that Frank felt that strongly about me. I knew he liked me, and he *trusted* me but he’d told me himself almost two weeks ago that he didn’t love me…yet. He didn’t love me yet. There was hope. Although I could safely say there was hope that Frank might love me back given enough time, I knew that there wasn’t going to be enough time.

These past three weeks had been the best three weeks of my life. I had seen, felt, experienced and learnt more than I’d ever thought possible. But it was going to end. It was always going to have to end. I knew that it would. I just didn’t know that it was going to end so soon. Without money we had no choice but to end it. But at least we could end it on our own terms.

“What’s wrong, Gerard?” Frank asked me again.

“It’s nothing, I’m fine,” I lied.

Frank narrowed his eyes at me. “No, you’re not, Gerard. You should see your face. You look terrified. The sirens are gone. No one is coming for you.”

“How much money do we have left, Frank?” I asked.

Frank looked uncomfortable. “Let me worry about that,” he said firmly.

“How much?”

He sighed and gave in. “’Bout $400.”

It was even less than I thought. Fucking hell. Frank gazed over at me sadly for a moment before crawling back onto the bed and crouching down behind me. He wrapped his arms around my chest and rested his forehead against my back. “I’m so sorry,” he said dejectedly. “I should’ve paid more attention to how much we were spending. This is my fault.”

I didn’t reply. Not because I believed what Frank had said, but because I didn’t know how to tell Frank that we were going to have to turn ourselves in. I knew he would’ve thought about the possibility of having to do that, but like me he wanted to avoid it at all costs. Frank hugged me tighter.

I was vaguely aware of Frank gently kissing the back of my neck but I was too busy thinking about other things to react.

We had no proof that Mikey was a patient at this imaginatively named Naval Medical Centre. The news was a wasteland on information relating to him. Instead, it was all about me. I hated it when things were all about me. That was the main reason why I always forbade Markman from announcing my birthday at Bluestone. I didn’t like attention. Attention only ever bought bad things. Bad things like *Them*.

Frank’s hand slipped under my shirt and his fingers started stroking my chest teasingly. It took every ounce of self-control I could muster to ignore his advances He didn’t need any more encouragement. I had to focus on our current situation, and the situation in question did not involve Frank’s hands roaming around beneath my shirt.

There was no way Frank and I were going to be able to walk into this hospital expecting to walk back out. We knew that now. We arrived in town two days ago and since then we’d been holed up in the closest motel to the hospital we could find, trying to think of a way to get to Mikey without being caught. It soon became very clear to me that the only way to see Mikey was to get caught. And, now that our money was almost all gone, it seemed the decision had been made.

“Ugh,” I grunted in surprise as Frank’s fingers tweaked my nipple. No

one had ever touched me there before. I'm not sure I liked it that much. "Frank," I said disapprovingly.

"Hmmm?" he replied, kissing my neck insistently.

"Don't -," I began but interrupted myself with a moan as Frank kissed an extremely sensitive part of my neck.

Frank removed his lips only long enough to grasp the hem of my shirt and determinedly remove it from my body.

Frank had very prominent issues associated with sex but he seemed to have no issues with both the concept and act of foreplay. He began kissing down my back, his hands still running themselves all over my chest, stopping now and then to tweak my nipples again. I tried to keep very still to try to fool Frank into thinking I wasn't interested in whatever he had planned. He paused suddenly as he reached the waistband of my jeans. Maybe he would stop now?

He sat up and used his hands to wrench my head around to face him. I knew where this was heading. I knew how this would end. Fuck it. In an instant I was clutching the side of his face with my hands. I took a brief moment to gaze at him before forcing my lips onto his. He reciprocated almost immediately, his hands coming up to clutch at my wrists. I kissed back harder, testing his limits. To my pleasant surprise his right hand shot out to tug at my hair. He pushed his tongue forward into my mouth, something he'd never done so forcefully before. He was obviously feeling more comfortable with me and with himself than ever before. Not satisfied with our positions, I wrapped one of my arms around his small waist and swiftly manoeuvred him so he was lying flat on his back and I was straddling his hips. I stopped kissing him and sat back, taking a moment to look at him and appreciate him. He stared back at me, his face flushed and his lips wet from the brief rough kissing session we'd just had.

The raw, animalistic urge I'd had only moments before seemed to subside dramatically and I leant down to place a more caring and soft kiss on Frank's lips. I pulled away after only a second and brushed his hair away affectionately. I placed another lingering peck on Frank's lips, teasing him. He smiled unreservedly and tried to pull me back in for another kiss. I grabbed his wrists quickly and playfully pinned them down over his head.

That was a mistake. "No," he said timidly, turning his head to the side and shutting his eyes.

Fuck.

I released his arms immediately and removed myself from my position on top of him. I was a fucking idiot. Why the fuck didn't I think that straddling a trauma victim and pinning them down would be okay? "I'm so sorry," I whispered and gently cupped the side of his face. My stomach churned and I felt disgusting. The look on Frank's face broke my heart. "I'm so sorry," I repeated and kissed his shoulder in what I hoped was a comforting manner. "I'm so sorry."

"It's okay," Frank said softly holding my hand tightly.

I felt like punching a wall. "It's not okay," I said miserably. "I'm so bad at this. I'm so sorry." I tried to move away from Frank. I didn't think he wanted me near him right now. Frank wouldn't relinquish his grip on my hand and I hesitated as he tried to pull me back down.

"Stop it," he said crossly. I did as he asked and sat back down next to him.

"I'm sorry," I said again.

"It's okay."

I looked at him forlornly. "But it's not okay, Frank. I keep hurting you. No matter what I do! I'm useless at this."

"It's not all bad," he said solemnly.

I heaved a sigh of exasperation and looked away.

"Don't be mad at me," Frank said crossly.

I threw my hands up. "I'm not mad. Do I look mad?" Okay, maybe I did sound a tiny bit angry. You get that way when you're a failure at life.

Frank looked bewildered. "Why are you acting like this?"

"Do you ever think about how I feel when you compare everything I do to them? It's heartbreaking, Frank."

"You always stop."

"What?" That didn't answer my question. He let go of my hand. I suddenly realised what he had said. "Of course I stop. I would never hurt you like that."

Frank looked exasperated. “That’s the point, you dick! You stop! You care! I’m never comparing you to them; I’m always comparing them to you.”

I *think* that was meant to be a compliment. I think it meant that I was the better person and they were nothing in comparison. At least that’s what I hoped it meant.

Frank propped himself up on his elbow and leant in to kiss me but I moved away. “Frank,” I whined. Why were we doing this again? I was bad at this. I was hurting him.

“Gerard,” Frank said tiredly.

“I don’t want to hurt you again,” I objected weakly as he tugged at my arm and tried to bring me closer. “Or frighten you.”

Frank clutched his head as though it hurt him. “How else are you supposed to learn? I can’t tell you what brings back memories. Even *I* don’t know what brings back memories. I don’t come with a manual. And *I don’t care* if you do something that frightens me because I know that you’ll stop and that you’ll never do it again.”

“Okay,” I said. I loved him and all his philosophical glory.

“Good. Now go back to kissing me.”

“Okay,” I said and promptly leant back in and kissed him. Kissing Frank always made me feel different. It made me feel courageous and as though I could do anything in the world. When I was kissing Frank I didn’t think about shooting people or *Them* or going to prison. I didn’t even think about my secrets.

All I thought about was Frank and how soft his lips were and how smooth his face was. I knew my face couldn’t compare. My lips had been more chapped than usual as I didn’t feel comfortable consuming tap water. Who knew what was in it. *They* could’ve poisoned it for all I knew. My face certainly wasn’t soft either. I wasn’t exactly a contender for No-Shave November but I did have some sort of manly stubble going.

Frank shuffled position so he was lying on top of me, his leg thrown carelessly over my crotch. His carelessness certainly didn’t help the growing tightness in my pants. Frank seemed to have some sort of magical power over me that caused me get aroused at least twice as fast as I would normally. Frank seemed oblivious to my growing

erection until his knee brushed over the area, which caused me to moan and buck my hips up.

“Oh.” That was all he said. My cheeks burned red from embarrassment. Frank slowly dropped his hand down to touch the denim which contained my erection. He took a deep breath and popped the button on my jeans and pulled down the zipper. He shot me a determined look and slipped his hand into my pants and wrapped his fingers around me.

Frank had never touched me like this before. I bit my lip in anticipation and pleasure as Frank hesitantly pulled my cock out from inside my pants and ran his hand up it slowly. With his other hand he flicked open the bottle of lube and squeezed it onto his fingers. He slid his hand up and down several times and my heart rate quickened.

Fuck. This felt so much better than anything I’d ever been able to do to myself. My breathing hitched and started coming out in gasps as Frank moved his hand faster. I clenched my eyes shut and couldn’t stop myself from thrusting up into Frank’s hand. He cupped my balls lightly for a second and moaned like a hormonal teenage boy. I couldn’t help it. I could feel the pleasure grow stronger and I tugged on the sheets mindlessly.

I let out a moan of disappointment as Frank stopped suddenly. I opened my eyes to see him tearing open a condom packet. He shot me an apologetic look and rolled the condom down onto my cock. He nodded in assertively and leant in. I was so fucking horny I felt like I was going to explode. He kissed me and then laid back down on the bed, spreading his legs for me.

I sat up and despite my sexually frustrated state I pushed Frank’s legs back together. His eyes widened in confusion. “Gerard,” he protested. “I’m okay. Look. No tears.”

I didn’t say a word. Instead I gently pushed Frank’s legs down to one side and then pushed on his hips so he was lying on his side with his legs pulled up halfway to his chest. His looks grew more questioning as I lay down behind him and moulded my body to fit perfectly against his. I propped my head up on my hand and Frank looked over his shoulder up at me. I kissed his lips chastely.

“Is this okay?” I asked worriedly. There was no way I was going to top him from above again. We’d tried it and it had failed. It was time to try something else. I don’t know why I hadn’t realised it before, but

Frank obviously had deep issues with being pinned down. I hadn't even thought about it until I'd seen the reaction he had when I tried restraining him. It made him panic.

"Yeah," Frank said sounding mildly surprised. "I never really thought…."

I had a brainwave and snatched up the box of condoms from the table. I opened one and slid it down over one of my fingers and then coated my finger in lube.

"Frank," I said, "I'm going to put my finger…inside you…. Okay?"

He inhaled deeply as though preparing himself. "Okay," he said hoarsely and I saw him bite down on his bottom lip harshly. I took a deep breath myself and slowly starting pushing my condom-covered finger inside Frank. He didn't freak out. He didn't tense up. He stayed very still and stared straight ahead. I had barely inserted my finger more than half an inch so the worst was still to come. I leant down and kissed Frank on the cheek protectively. "Bit more," I whispered into his ear and pushed my finger in further. Frank shut his eyes, still amazingly calm. I could from the new lines that had appeared on his brow that he was uncomfortable but he was being strong.

I don't know how long it took for Frank to get used to my first finger but he did eventually. I was torn over whether the hard part was yet to come or whether it had already been overcome. Either way, my heart ached for Frank as I slowly pushed in a second finger. His hand shot out and clutched at the pillow and he made a low whining noise in the back of his throat.

I kissed his neck exactly twenty times trying to alleviate some of the discomfort. I knew that most of the discomfort was coming from the mental pain. But he needed to overcome that if he ever wanted to replace the memory. The only way to overcome it was to suffer through it. I pushed my two fingers in slowly and then pulled them back out. I repeated this so many times I lost track.

"Everything is okay," I murmured into his ear and stroked his hair comfortingly. To my surprise, he nodded.

"I trust you," he said, opening his eyes and looking back at me. With my eyes still locked on his I pushed in my third finger. Frank groaned in pain and clenched his eyes shut. "I don't like that," he mumbled, his shoulders tensing painfully.

“Do you want me to stop?” I asked.

He didn’t reply for almost a minute. I kept my fingers very still waiting for him to speak. “No,” he said eventually and I took that as a cue to move my fingers again. Frank moaned several more times but he never told me to stop. I wasn’t sure if it was from pleasure or pain though. Probably a mixture of both.

“Tell me when you’re ready.” I slipped my third finger back out and continued with only two fingers until he gave me the go ahead.

I gently removed my fingers from inside Frank and threw the condom to the side. I focused my attention on moulding myself back against Frank’s body and lined up my cock carefully. I then looked back up at Frank and tried to gauge his mental state. He had his eyes closed again and he was clutching the pillow under his head tightly.

I decided to go for it. There was no use asking Frank if he was okay when he obviously wasn’t. I pushed the head of my cock inside Frank and my body was immediately racked with waves of pleasure. I’d actually forgotten how tight it was. I could feel Frank’s muscles contracting down around me again and again. I tore my attention away from my cock and ran my fingers through Frank’s hair. “Frank?” I said.

He nodded and I noticed that the frown lines on his face were more pronounced. “I’m okay,” he said. I watched his face carefully and pushed myself in further. His head tipped back into my chest, exposing his throat. His mouth fell open and he let out a soft moan. I pushed myself in the rest of the way and felt a stab of guilt as Frank’s face contorted in pain. But there was no panic. I think he was actually okay. Maybe this was the way to fix him.

I rested my free hand on Frank’s hip and rubbed the area in what I hoped was a comforting manner while I waited for him to adjust. My heart was racing as Frank’s heated insides clenched down around me. I respected Frank and there was no way I was going to do anything without his permission but I fantasised briefly about how it would feel to just grab his hips and go for it. I mentally cursed myself for even thinking such a dangerous thought.

Frank moved one of his hands back to clutch my arse tightly. I slid myself out of Frank the tiniest bit and then pushed myself back in with the barest minimum force. Frank let out a grunt and buried his face into the soft cotton of the pillow. I repeated the action after

pulling out slightly further. I didn't hear Frank's reaction over the sound of my own moan. It was just the pressure…and the heat…and the tightness. It was making my head explode. I continued thrusting shallowly into Frank and struggled to monitor him as waves of pleasure kept racing through me.

I dropped my hand down from his hip to touch Frank's cock. I slowly started jerking him into arousal which made him lift his head from where it had been buried in the pillow. He tipped his head back to look at me and I kissed him. He moaned into my mouth as I continued to jerk him off. It was becoming very difficult to coordinate my thrusting into Frank whilst jacking him off and also kissing him reassuringly. Despite this I knew I was going to come soon.

I rolled my hips, falling into an easy and sensual rhythm. Frank was reacting positively to everything I was doing and it was giving me hope. More than once now he'd made sounds of pleasure. I paused as Frank started gasping suddenly. "Are you okay?" I said urgently, slightly distracted.

He replied with a moan and came in my hand. I didn't realise he was so close. I was taken aback. How the fuck didn't I know? My thoughts about Frank's unexpected climax were short-lived as every single muscle in his pelvic region went impossibly tight and contracted around my cock. I tried to thrust into what could only be described as a vice but to no avail. Instead my toes curled inwards and I couldn't support my head anymore. My head fell back onto the bed as I probably made all manner of embarrassing noises.

As soon as my vision cleared I leant over to check Frank. He was still breathing deeply, one hand resting on his chest. I kissed the side of his mouth and tried to get him to turn over so he was facing me. He obliged and rolled into my chest, pressing his lips to my skin.

"I didn't know it could feel like that," he mumbled as I rubbed his back.

"Me neither," I confessed. "It was okay though?"

"Yeah. It – it hurt…less…than I remembered."

I frowned even though he couldn't see my face. I wasn't sure which time he was comparing it to. Was he comparing it to the first time I topped him? Had I really hurt him that much? Or was he talking about the other men? I didn't know and I wasn't sure I wanted to know. "I'm glad," I said softly.

“Thank you, Gerard,” he said solemnly. I noticed that he was still holding his hand to his chest.

“You’re welcome,” I said awkwardly. It felt weird to be accepting thanks from your boyfriend after just having sex with him.

We stayed curled up together in the now dark room for a long time. I was dying to ask Frank if it had worked – if we had successfully replaced his memory. I had no idea whether it was even possible to replace such a large and poisonous memory in the first place, so I was insanely curious. He didn’t offer the information and I didn’t dare ask so my curiosity went unsatisfied, much to my dismay.

He didn’t say anything about whether it had worked the next morning either. I woke up to him sitting on the bed organising all the money we had into little piles. He didn’t know that I was awake so I watched him silently for several minutes. Every now and then his right hand would reach up to touch his chest again as though it was bothering him.

“Does it hurt?” I asked. Frank turned to look at me, his hand dropping away from his chest as he did. I was afraid that maybe I’d hurt him last night.

He smiled. “No.”

I raised an eyebrow, seeking enlightenment but he shook his head and turned on the television instead. I sat up and kissed him affectionately. I set my hand down on his chest. “Then why do you –.”

Frank stopped my question by kissing me back. “I’ll tell you another day. I promise. I’m just trying to get used to something first.”

I shot him an understanding look and made my way to the shower. I had barely been under the water for two minutes when Frank banged on my door and called urgently to me. “Come look!” he cried.

I was standing dripping wet in the middle of the motel room, a towel clutched in my hand in less than two seconds. Frank turned up the sound on the television as I wrapped the towel around my waist. The newsreader was in the middle of announcing a breaking news story: “ – moved back to the White House either later this morning or early this afternoon.”

I didn’t hear anymore after that. I didn’t need to. I knew exactly what she was talking about. I only had a small window of opportunity left

to see Mikey. I raced back to the bathroom and pulled my clothes back on. I didn't yet have a plan, and that worried me.

"Gerard?" Frank said concerned as I stood in the bathroom doorway racking my brains.

"I'm thinking," I said smacked my head with my palms. Maybe if I went and found a staff entrance and slipped in that way? No. Maybe I could pay someone…? No, we had no money. Maybe I could disguise myself. I could bleach my hair. Surely that would give me an advantage. Yes, that could work.

"Gerard?" Frank asked again.

"I need to see him before they move him away," I said out loud, not speaking directly to anyone.

I saw Frank nod out of the corner of my eye. "How?" he said.

I raised a finger as though about to blurt out some amazing plan but nothing came to me. Instead I stood there stupidly, my brain failing me. "Disguises," I said eventually.

Frank looked unimpressed. "Gerard, everyone is looking for you."

"I know that," I snapped. Fuck my fucking useless brain. Why didn't it work when I needed it?!

"We could just walk in…."

"And get caught? I'd barely make it to the front counter before the spooks or secret service, or *whatever the fuck they're called,* are all over me. I'd never get to see Mikey."

"We," Frank corrected me quietly.

"What?"

"*We'd* never make it to the front counter. *We'd* never get to see Mikey."

"I can't ask you to do that. Once they get me they'll stop looking for you. You'll be free, Frank."

Frank looked outraged. "I'm coming with you."

"No."

“I’m coming with you,” he said stubbornly and starting shoving items into his backpack with an unnecessary amount of force.

My heart swelled as I watched him march around the room collecting our belongings. We’d accumulated a lot of stuff over the past three weeks. “As if I’d let you go alone,” he scoffed to himself.

I still needed a plan. If I walked into that hospital I’d never get to see Mikey. I needed to bargain with someone. I needed to tell someone that I’d give myself up, but only if I got to see Mikey.

It took over an hour for me to gather up enough courage to pick up the phone. A mild panic attack later, I was punching Markman’s cell number into the number pad on the motel room phone. My finger froze above the last number. Once I pressed it, it would call and it would be over.

In determination I pressed the ‘two’ button and placed the receiver near my ear. Frank was perched on the bed next to me, his face flushed. I didn’t know how it came to this.

“Hello?”

Fuck. It had barely rung twice. Markman must’ve been sitting by her phone. I opened my mouth but no words came out.

“Hello? Gerard?”

How the fuck did she know it was me?

Frank grabbed my leg. “Say something,” he hissed. He leant in close to the receiver so he could hear what she was saying.

“Hello,” I said croakily.

“Oh, thank God,” Markman said and I imagined her clutching her head in relief. “Are you okay?”

“Yes.”

“What about –,” she began but I cut her off.

“I want to see him,’ I demanded.

“Okay.”

Okay? My eyes bugged out of my head and Frank looked just as

shocked.

“I want to see Mikey,” I repeated just to make sure she had heard me right.

“Okay,” Markman said again and Frank squeezed my leg again, this time in delight. “Gerard, is Frank with you?”

I didn’t answer immediately. I glanced at Frank and he was nodding furiously. I shook my head. I couldn’t drag him into this with me. He reached out to snatch the phone from my hand as though to tell Markman himself but I moved away. “Yes,” I said reluctantly.

Markman sounded relieved. “Is he okay?”

“Yes,” I replied. Frank smiled smugly. There was no way I could get rid of him now.

“Good,” Markman said pleased. “Very good. That makes me feel much better. Where are you?”

“Do you promise to let me see him?” I said warily.

“I promise. Do you know where you are?”

I glanced up at Frank again. I was about to give us up. In three seconds it was going to be all over. “The Kennedy Motel. Room Nine.” It was over.

There was a flurry of movement from Markman’s end of the phone. It sounded like she was on the move. She probably was. She was probably on her way to the motel right now with God knows how many other people. “Okay, Gerard, we’re coming to you now. Stay where you are, okay?”

I hung up.

Frank reached out and hugged me tightly. I didn’t quite believe what I had just done. I wondered how long it would take for Markman to reach us. If she were staying at the hospital like I thought she was then she’d probably be here in less than five minutes.

I was wrong. It took six minutes. The sound of half a dozen cars roaring into the motel parking lot alerted us to her arrival. She’d obviously bought an entourage with her. Frank looked at me nervously and I felt sick. I didn’t want it to end. Why couldn’t I stay

with Frank in a shitty cheap motel forever?

The silhouettes of numerous people suddenly appeared in front of the window and I could see them trying to peer in through the curtains. Frank looked terrified at the sudden invasion and jumped off the bed to stand as far away from the window as possible. There was a knock at the door. I glanced between the door and Frank. Frank was actually trembling and had wrapped his arms around himself. I didn't blame him. I didn't know what was going to happen after I opened that door.

I stood up and walked across to the door. I leant in close. "Who is it?" I called.

Frank giggled from behind me and I shot him a grin. I might as well go out in classic Gerard style.

"It's me, Gerard," Markman said and tried the door handle.

"Who's me?"

Markman knew I was fucking with her but she didn't take my bait and get frustrated. "Dr. Markman," she said, "your amazing treating physician who has been worried sick about you for the past three weeks."

I heard a male voice say something but I didn't quite catch what he said. I did, however, hear Markman's terse, "shut up and let me handle this." I raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Put that away," I heard Markman snap.

Fuck. Where the guys out there packing heat? That frightened me. I suddenly didn't want to open the door. Would they shoot me? Would they shoot Frank?

"Gerard, are you going to let me in?"

I thought about asking her for the password but decided against it. The whole idea of men with guns spooked me out and I didn't want to make anyone angry. I sighed. "Yeah," I said and undid all the locks on the door. "Come in," I called and took several hasty steps backwards.

The door opened immediately and Markman stepped through the door.

"Oh, hello," I said nonchalantly, as though I hadn't been expecting her.

She didn't smile. Instead she was swept aside by five men in crisp, black suits and black sunglasses. Frank was instantly by my side, clutching my arm tightly as the men inspected the room for who knows what.

"It's okay," I murmured and wrapped my arm around his waist protectively.

Markman approached us cautiously. She looked between Frank and I several times. "Are you both okay?"

We nodded in unison and she looked incredibly relieved. I saw her eyes drop to the arm I had around Frank's waist but she didn't comment.

"We need to vacate the premises," one of the men in black said and signalled to the four other men. Markman nodded and shepherded us towards the door.

"Don't forget our stuff," I objected and pointed to the bags we'd put together.

I didn't get to see if they bothered to grab our belongings before I was practically stuffed into one of the cars. I glanced out the window and saw heaps of people standing around watching. Some of them were holding up their phones, taping the whole show. I growled at the disgusting way they were acting. I would never film them getting captured and they should show me the same respect.

"Ignore them," Markman instructed. I flipped them all off as we drove past but Markman ruined my fun. "They can't see you," she said indifferently.

Damn. Frank was very quiet next to me. He was holding my hand tightly in his lap and staring down at his knees. "It's okay," I whispered to him.

He nodded. "I know." I kissed the side of his head quickly and he blushed. I don't think he was very comfortable with so many strange people around.

Ten minutes later Frank and I were inside the hospital and sitting at a large table with Markman. There were two men in black standing against the walls of the small room, watching me. I didn't like the idea of these men following me and standing over me all the time. They could be working for *Them* for all I knew.

Markman was studying both Frank and I carefully. “What you did was very irresponsible,” she began.

I frowned. Wasn’t she the one who let us leave in the first place? I thought about bringing that fact up but decided against it. I didn’t want to get her in trouble if no one knew that’s what she did.

“How did you manage to survive out there? Where did you sleep?”

“When can I see Mikey?”

“Where did you get the money from?”

“When can I see Mikey?” I repeated. She obviously hadn’t heard me.

“Later,” she said, brushing my request aside.

I stood up angrily. “I want to see him now,” I said in a restrained voice. She promised me.

Markman pursed her lips and exchanged a look with one of the men in black who had moved in closer when I stood up. “That’s not a good idea, Gerard.”

The fury rose up inside me. Next to me, Frank’s mouth dropped open in shock. He didn’t believe that she was daring to go back on her word. She *promised* me! “You promised me!” I exclaimed and beat the table with my fist. “I want to see him.”

Markman looked upset. “No.”

I took a step towards her and raised my fist but the closest man in black pushed me back. I stumbled slightly and Frank stood up to steady me. “You promised me,” I said, my anger dissipating into hopelessness

“Mikey’s gone, Gerard,” Markman said heavily and I panicked.

“He’s dead?!” I exclaimed and Frank clutched my arm tightly. He couldn’t be dead. They said on the television that he wasn’t dead!

Markman looked flustered. “No! No. He’s not dead. He’s alive. He’s just…different. I don’t know what you remember about him, Gerard, but that’s gone. He’s not the same Mikey anymore.”

I didn’t understand. How could he been alive but gone at the same time? I needed to talk to him. I needed to tell him I was sorry. “I – I –

I don't – ugh," I said helplessly and sat down.

"You don't understand?" Markman guessed.

"No. What is wrong with him? Why can't I see him? Did you even ask him if he wanted to see me?"

Markman rubbed her eyes sorrowfully. "He won't recognise you, Gerard. He doesn't know who you are."

"Why not!?" Markman looked like she wasn't going to answer. "Stop trying to protect me," I cried and clenched my fists together.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "Okay," she said eventually. "You deserve to know."

I didn't reply for fear of making her change her mind. I just sat forward and listened intently.

"When Mikey accidentally got…." She paused and shot me a warning look. "…shot."

"When I shot him," I interjected frankly.

"Accidentally," Markman said loudly.

I opened my mouth to say something else but Frank set his hand down on my thigh. He shook his head at me. I reluctantly shut my mouth and let Markman continue.

"When Mikey *accidentally* got shot he went in cardiac arrest. Which means his heart stopped beating. Okay?" I nodded mutely and she continued. "Because his heart stopped beating no oxygen was getting pumped to his brain. It's very important for preservation of function that the brain gets oxygen. Do you understand that?"

"Yes."

Markman took a deep breath. "They eventually managed to resuscitate him in the ambulance but when they got to hospital they discovered that Hypoxic Ischemic Encephalopathy had developed. I know you don't understand what that means," she added at the baffled look on my face. "It's a term used to describe brain damage caused by a lack of oxygen and blood flow to the brain and it often results in mental retardation."

I stared at Markman blankly. I didn't understand.

“Mikey’s not Mikey anymore, Gerard. He looks sixteen but mentally he’s not really there. He’s like a child. He’s still being retaught how to move and talk and communicate. He doesn’t remember much. As far as we know, he doesn’t remember you at all. He’s….” She couldn’t think of the word.

“Broken,” Frank said quietly.

He was broken. I’d broken him. I’d shot him and destroyed him. I was a monster. I think I felt better when I thought he was dead instead of trapped in a broken mind.

“I want to see him,” I said unable to tear my eyes from the ground.

Markman shook her head. “That is a very bad idea, Gerard. It won’t accomplish anything. It’ll just upset you.”

“Please.” I needed some sort of closure.

“No, Gerard.”

“Please.”

She sighed. “Wait here,” she instructed and left the room.

I didn’t feel very hopeful. “Are you okay?” Frank asked tentatively and squeezed my hand.

“No,” I replied shortly.

“It’ll be okay.” He was trying to comfort me. He was wrong. It wasn’t going to be okay.

Markman didn’t return for a long time but when she did she was accompanied by a blonde lady in a lab coat. Markman introduced her as Dr. Gold. Dr. Gold sat down next to me. I avoided her eye contact. I didn’t feel worthy enough to look at anyone right now. I was a monster.

“Hello, Gerard,” Dr. Gold said and took my hand. She held it tightly. “Dr. Markman tells me that you want to say hello to Mikey?” I nodded furiously. She nodded as well. “That’s fine,” she said. “We can do that. He likes visitors. But, before you see him I want to talk about a few things with you, okay? I want to prepare you.”

I nodded again. Prepare away, but make it quick. I had a brother to see.

“There are several things that really upset Mikey. He gets very anxious with yelling and loud noises. He doesn’t like surprises or unexpected movements so try and stay calm. Can you do that, Gerard?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Another thing: self-mutilation is quite common in people with brain damage and Mikey likes to pick at his fingers so don’t be alarmed by the gloves and tape on his hands. They’re there for his protection. He also suffers from involuntary muscle spasms and twitches so be aware of that. Most of all you have to remember that mentally he is barely the age of a six year old so don’t expect too much of him.”

“Can I see him now?” I asked. I didn’t want to believe that Mikey was going to do any of the things she just said. I wanted to believe that he would recognise me. I wanted to believe that he would be okay.

“Sure.”

She led me from the room and I shot a look at Frank as I left. He nodded encouragingly. Dr. Gold led me down several corridors and stopped in front of a door. “Remember what I said,” she said warningly and opened the door.

He looked just like I imagined him. Well, physically anyway. My brother was sitting at a bright green plastic table, which was strewn with paper and crayons and pencils. He was wearing a bright yellow Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles shirt and bright blue boxer shorts with the Superman logo on them. A pair of glasses was perched on the end of his nose. I didn’t remember him wearing glasses. I sat down at the table opposite him.

“Hello, Mikey,” I said nervously.

He didn’t even acknowledge I had sat down. Instead he clutched a red pencil tightly in his fist and rubbed it furiously across the paper. The lady next to him shook her head at his colouring style. “Now, Mikey,” she said patiently and plucked the pencil from his fist. “How do we hold a pencil?” She tried to position the pencil properly between his thumb and his index and middle fingers.

Mikey made a loud noise of disagreement and pushed her hands away roughly.

“Mikey,” she said loudly. “That’s not how we treat people.”

He didn't listen to her. Instead he flung the pencil on the ground and folded his arms angrily. He made sort of unintelligible comment. "Use your words," the lady said and picked the pencil up.

"N-n-no!" he spluttered and swept all the pencils within reach off the table.

I felt sick. My heart ached at the sight of him. This wasn't my brother. My brother was gone. I had broken him. The lady who I assumed was some sort of occupational therapist gave me a comforting look. "He's having a bit of a bad day," she explained and placed all the pencils back on the desk.

I glanced back to Mikey. He was staring up at the roof. I looked up to see what had caught his attention but there was nothing. He was staring at nothing. Normal people didn't stare at nothing. I glanced down at his hands and one of them was shaking. I figured it must be one of those involuntary muscle spasms the doctor was talking about.

"Talk to him," the therapist encouraged.

I panicked. What should I say? "Hey, Mikey," I said loudly. To my surprise Mikey looked up at me. "Hey," I repeated and smiled as best I could at him.

His eyes dropped back down and he continued colouring in. I leant in to see what he was drawing. "That's a really good picture," I commented and pointed to the crude stick figures he was drawing. I suddenly noticed the Batman tattoo Mikey had on his forearm. "Are they superheroes?" I asked. I figured he liked Superheroes and was probably drawing them too.

He nodded and bounced up and down in his chair. "Yes," he forced out.

One of the stick figures had black hair. "Is that Batman?" I asked.

Mikey made a loud growling noise in his throat. He sounded angry. I didn't know what I had done wrong. "No, you stupid head!" he exclaimed, his words disjointed and strained as though it was hard for him to say them. "It's not Batman!" he said and his voice rose. "It's my brother. It's Gee-rard." He growled again and his hand twitched. "Not Batman."

The therapist's head snapped up and she stared at me. My heart started to race. I wasn't sure but I think Mikey may have just

indirectly called me a Superhero. He was certainly drawing me as one. A strange feeling came over me.

“Where is your brother?” I asked casually.

Mikey looked up at the same spot on the ceiling again and I noticed he was rocking back and forth in his chair. He couldn’t sit still. I repeated the question twice more but Mikey didn’t reply. I couldn’t get his attention.

“Mikey,” I said forcefully. “Where’s Gerard?”

Mikey didn’t look at me. “He got lost,” he said indifferently and put one of his gloved fingers in his mouth. The therapist pulled it out quickly.

What did that mean? I didn’t understand what his six-year-old brain was trying to tell me. Mikey suddenly ripped his glasses off and flung them on the ground. “Lies!” he exclaimed. I sat back, startled by his odd behaviour. He started rocking back and forth in his seat again.

I felt my eyes begin to tear up. I didn’t want to cry in front of him. I wanted to ask Mikey what he thought about me but I was afraid of what I was going to hear. Mikey suddenly turned his attention to me and I wiped my eyes furiously. “I’m so sorry,” I choked out.

“Why?” Mikey asked.

“I did something very bad and lots of people got hurt.”

Mikey tilted his head to the side inquisitively. “Gee-rard did something bad t-too. Th-that’s my brother,” he added as though I’d forgotten.

“Gerard is very sorry,” I said and lost the fight to keep from crying.

“I’m hungry,” he announced and rubbed his stomach.

I buried my head in my hands and let the tears fall from my eyes. I felt someone put their arms around me and I looked up in surprise. Mikey was hugging me. “What-what-whatever you did, everyone forgives y-y-you,” he said matter-of-factly.

“Do you forgive me?” I asked desperately

Mikey poked me in the arm. “Um, d-d-do you want a s-s-sand-wich?”

I shook my head. He shrugged and sat back down. A moment later he was banging his fists on the table furiously and snapping the crayons in half.

“I’m sorry,” I cried urgently as the therapist tried to restrain him. He only fought against her harder and several nurses ran in from outside to help. “Mikey, I’m so sorry!”

He froze and looked at me over the arms of one of the nurses. His eyes were open wide and I thought that maybe he recognised me. “Will you f-f-find my brother?” he asked and narrowed his eyes at me. “He’s a little bit l-lost.”

I nodded silently. Mikey looked satisfied. “Bye.”

The nurses led Mikey out of the room and I stared helplessly after him trying to understand what he was saying. It had to mean something. It had to be more than a broken boy’s ramblings.

“Are you okay?” An unfamiliar male voice spoke to me and I spun around. I vaguely recognised this man. He’d shown up at Bluestone once before and I’d seen him on the television once or twice. I think this man is my father.

I didn’t reply. Instead I gazed stupidly at the tall, powerful man as he sat down gracefully in Mikey’s seat. He looked through Mikey’s simple drawings and scribbles pensively.

“Are you okay?” he asked again without making eye contact.

“No.”

“He’s normally more lucid than that,” the man said and squinted at the superhero drawing. “I’m sorry you had to see him like that. It’s distressing.”

“He didn’t recognise me,” I said quietly.

“He doesn’t recognise me or your mother either. I’m sure Dr. Gold told you but Mikey’s not there anymore. This is someone different.”

“It’s all my fault. If I hadn’t –,” I said through clenched teeth.

“No it’s not.”

“It is!”

“I’m not going to have this argument with you,” he said dismissively. “It happened. It was an accident. Your mother and I have moved on and you should too.”

I folded my arms and went into a silent sulk. Of course *he* could get over it and move on, he didn’t kill anyone. He wasn’t left to rot in a mental institution for four years with no memories.

“I met Frank,” my father said. “He’s a lovely boy.”

“He’s my boyfriend,” I said pointedly.

“I know. I don’t have any problems with you being gay, Gerard.” I glanced up at him in surprise. He smiled at my shocked face. “I’m not a monster,” he said. “You’re my son. I love you. But you know what’s going to happen now, right?”

Of course I knew what was going to happen now. I was going to be shipped off to Greenwood and kept in a tiny padded cell for the rest of my life because of what I’d done. I was going to be locked away and separated from Frank forever.

“We found somewhere new for you to stay,” my father said gently. “It’s called the Brock Institute.”

“Why can’t I stay at Bluestone?” I asked hopefully.

“Bluestone isn’t really the best place for you at the moment. You need to be somewhere safe and secure where you can get help.”

“I can get all the help I need at Bluestone. Markman will help me.”

“She’s been trying to help you for the past four years, Gerard, and it’s not enough. We need to try something else. Brock is a new place that I think you’ll like. It’s nice. I looked just this morning. And you’ll be safe there, I promise.”

I let my shoulders slump in defeat. “Can Frank come with me?”

My father shook his head firmly. “It is no place for Frank, you know that.”

“What will happen to him?” I asked.

“Well Dr. Markman said that she’ll take him back to Bluestone and reassess what to do with him from there.”

I felt slightly comforted by that. He'd be safe at Bluestone. Ray, Bob and Adam would probably all still be there. And I guess he could come and visit me? Would he even want to come and visit me? I wouldn't come and visit me. I wasn't even sure if Frank would even look at me after he saw what I'd done to Mikey. I had to find another way to keep him safe.

"Can you do something for me?" I requested and dug around in my pocket for an old newspaper clipping.

"Anything."

I held out the newspaper clipping with the pictures of Frank's rapists on it. I pointed to the men. "They hurt Frank. Can you find them and arrest them, please? Or just get them off the streets so he doesn't have to worry? I can't protect him anymore and I need to know they're not going to get him."

My father studied the paper for a moment. "Gerard, I think this is something we need to discuss with Frank."

"Then let's get him," I said and began to stand.

"Later," my father said patiently. "We have plenty of time."

I saw someone move out of the corner of my eye and I leapt to my feet when I saw who it was: Jasper. My heart rate quickened. What was he doing here? The last time he saw me he said he would watch me die. Was I about to die? "I need to go," I said and started walking towards the door. I had to get away. I needed to hide.

My father followed me. "I'm not finished speaking to you yet," he said.

"In a minute," I said distractedly as Jasper signalled that he wanted to speak to me.

"No, Gerard. *Now*." He put his hand on my shoulder and I threw it off forcibly. In a split second one of the men who had been hovering nearby slammed his palm into my chest and sent me sprawling to the floor. Gasping for breath and clutching my chest I stared up at my father who was suddenly surrounded by six men who were leading him away from me.

"Stop it," my father exclaimed and pushed past his entourage. He crouched down next to me and tried to touch me but I shifted away.

“Are you okay?” he said.

The pain in my chest was ridiculous. That man must’ve had super strength or something. I scrambled backwards and then to my feet. I threw open the door and faltered as I saw the corridor was packed with people. Frank was the only one looking at me with concern. Everyone else was looking at me warily as though they expected me to shoot them all.

“Gerard,” my father called.

I ignored him and pushed through the crowd, moving as far away from Jasper as I could. I raced down the corridor and dashed into a disabled bathroom. I slammed the door shut and locked it. Then I turned around and froze when I saw that Jasper was in the room with me.

“You’re not real,” I said my voice quavering.

“Yeah, whatever you say,” he said dismissively. He leant against the wall and surveyed me with a smug look on his face. “So, daddy’s sending you to Brock?” he mocked. “You’ll have to thank him for me.”

I turned around to reopen the door but Jasper grabbed me by the shoulders and pulled me away. He stood boldly in front of the door, preventing me from leaving. “Let me go,” I said bravely.

“*They* have spies in Brock. You won’t even last a week.”

My mouth went dry and my throat constricted in fear. I shook my head in disbelief. My father wouldn’t send me to a place where *They* had spies. I had to tell him. There had to be somewhere else.

The door handled rattled from behind Jasper and he grinned. “Your daddy’s going to ship you off to Brock and then *They’ll* come for you and I’ll finally get to watch you die. Finally!” he said gleefully. “I’ve had enough of your shit.”

“But they’ll get my secrets! Jasper, the world will end!”

He shrugged. “Then I guess this is the way the world ends: Not with a bang, but a whimper. You always were a pathetic and weak choice for a secret keeper.”

The door burst open and Jasper hastily stepped aside. Markman crouched down next to me as I clutched my throat painfully.

“Don’t let them get me,” I begged, grabbing her arm. “I can’t go. *Please*,” I pleaded. “The world will end!”

She didn’t know what to do. Why didn’t she know what to do? She’d made them go away many times before. She was the only one they were afraid of.

Two men reached down and hauled me to my feet. I yelled and kicked out at them. I was sure they were going to take me to Brock. They were going to take me to my death. My furious struggle against them only increased their desire to restrain me. They dropped me to the floor and held me down as I kicked and screamed. People all around me were screaming and yelling instructions.

I felt one of the men turn my head to the side and then I felt the needle slide in through my skin.

“No,” I said weakly.

Jasper just laughed.

“I'm probably one of the most dangerous men in the world if I want to be. But I never wanted to be anything but me.”

It appears that I have been sentenced to permanently exist in the presence of my intern, the intern I met in Hell Week: Brendon.

I remember Brendon. He thinks he’s my friend. He’s wrong. He is not my friend. He is my enemy.

Of course he is not as much of an enemy as *They* are, but I still deem it appropriate to classify him as one. I remember very clearly the viciousness of the lies he wrote in his report about me to Markman. He called me callous and selfish. He called me crazy.

“I’m not crazy,” I announce impatiently to Brendon and Dr. Morgan. They are both studying me keenly, their pens poised and ready to sign off on the continuation of my involuntary treatment order.

It was a lie, of course. I know I’m crazy. I *destroyed* my brother because I am crazy. But, I don’t want to be here, so I have to convince Dr. Morgan and Brendon that I am sane and should be discharged. I need to convince them both that I am well enough to be released into the community.

It is never going to happen, but one can hope.

“You *don’t* think you’re crazy?” Dr. Morgan reiterates. I don’t like Dr. Morgan. At all. In fact, I hate her. She is even better at reading my mind than Markman and that scares me. She has this way of looking into my eyes and forcing me to speak to her and tell her about my feelings. As a result I have been forced to build two extra walls since arriving at Brock and meeting her. She obviously isn’t human. She is obviously evil.

I nod, agreeing with her statement.

“So, you were in your right mind when you hurt Mikey?” she asks.

What the fuck kind of question is that?! Who asks someone that?

Fuck. That is why she is evil. I am no longer referring to her as Dr. Morgan, she shall be Dr. Evil.

I don't reply to her statement. I feel my chest tighten as she forces me to think about the brother I have destroyed. I have spent a lot of time coming up with ways to not think about Mikey, but Dr. Evil pushes the topic every time she sees me.

"Gerard?" Dr. Evil presses.

"I don't know!" I say defensively. To be honest, I don't even remember hurting Mikey, so I have no way of knowing whether I had been in my right mind or not.

Dr. Evil watches me carefully and I quickly smooth out my facial features. I can't let her see how much pain it causes me to think about Mikey. "So, you don't think you're crazy, Gerard?"

"Crazy is a very strong word," I object nonchalantly, and study my fingernails. Acting nonchalant is one of the walls I have built. It is very effective. I need to give the impression of being indifferent and in control. Being in control is the very opposite of crazy and I can't be both.

Dr. Evil looked surprised. "I'm using *your* word, Gerard," she said. "You were the one who used the word in the first place when you told me you weren't crazy. In fact, I don't think you're crazy at all. I think you're sick."

My wall of nonchalance weakened slightly at the word 'sick.' Markman often tried to convince me that I was sick. Frank tried to do the same thing. I'm not sick.

Sickness implies weakness and weakness implies that I am not up to the challenge of carrying these secrets. Jasper is wrong; I am not a pathetic and weak choice for a secret keeper. I have kept the secrets safe for years. I'd pay a lot of money to know of anyone else who could do a better job than that. Most secret keepers barely last six months, but not me.

I clench my fists together tightly. "I'm not sick," I say, weighing each word heavily and spitting it out like it is poison.

Dr. Evil nods. "So, you're not sick, and you're not crazy?" she asks.

Exactly.

“Then why do you think you are here?” she continues casually.

“I don’t know.”

“Yes, you do.” Her calmness is frustrating.

“I honestly have no idea.” That’s a lie.

“Yes, you do.”

“No, seriously, Doctor –.”

Dr. Evil shakes her head at my protests. “Yes, you know exactly why you are here. Tell me.”

“No.” I know exactly why I’m here, but I won’t ever admit to it.

“Tell me.” Her voice is firm but she is still unwaveringly composed. I hate her. She is going to make me say something I’ll regret.

I beat my fists down on the armrests of my chair. “No, stop it.”

“Tell me.”

“Because I destroyed my brother! Okay?!” The words exit my mouth before I’m fully aware of them.

Dr. Evil goes silent as I practically shake with anger. That is private information. She has forced me to admit that to her. How dare she use her abilities on me? She has *powers*. She has no right to make me say things like that.

“Destroyed?” Dr. Evil says softly.

I stand up from my chair and march out of the room. I will not be subjected to questioning about Mikey. Dr. Evil has no right to know how soul-consuming and gut wrenching my guilt is. That’s private.

I am here in Brock because I am a monster.

I make my way to the cafeteria and sit down at an empty table. I don’t have a table of my own here. I don’t like having to sit at a new table for every meal. I hate it, but I can’t control it. I don’t dare challenge anyone in this place. They all look and act like they could kill me with their bare hands.

At Bluestone, people respected me and feared me. They left me alone.

I had a reputation. But here in Brock I'm the new guy, and everyone knows that the new guy gets treated like shit.

I pull my sketchbook out of my jacket and hold it loosely in my hands. A second later, it is ripped from my grasp by one of the other patients. He darts away from me as I lunge after him.

"What have we got here?" he says patronisingly and flicks through the pages. Panicked, I scramble towards him, but he runs away, putting the table between us. "Oh, who's this?" he asks and holds up an incomplete sketch I've done of Frank. "He's so pretty."

"Give it back!" I exclaim, and lunge unsuccessfully across the table towards him.

"He looks like he could be one of the purple people. Is he? My girlfriend was one of them. She had purple skin. That's why she died."

"That's why you killed her," I snarl and wrench the sketchbook from his hands.

He shrugs. "She was one of the purple people. She wasn't human. Humans don't have purple skin, dickhead."

"Misha, leave Gerard alone." An orderly finally notices Misha's harassing and comes over to put an end to it. "Go and sit at another table."

I shoot a filthy look at Misha as he wanders off. I'm not a dickhead. He's the dickhead. And Misha? What kind of fucking stupid name is Misha? I sit back down at the table and smooth down the pages Misha has crinkled. I stop running my fingers along the creases to stare down at the picture I'd drawn. I miss Frank so much.

I hurriedly close my sketchbook and tuck it back inside my jacket as a nurse approaches my table. She thrusts a tiny paper cup in my face, which I accept obediently. Then, like I've done for the last week, I throw the pills into my mouth and pretend to wash them down with a small swig of water. After deftly hiding them both under my tongue and up next to my gum, I open my mouth to the nurse for inspection. She looks into my mouth more carefully than usual, but upon seeing no evidence of my deceit, she moves away to poison the next patient.

As soon as her back is turned I quickly spit the tablets out into my hand before they disintegrate in my mouth, and stow them away in my pocket. The next chance I get I'll flush them down the toilet. It's

too easy.

I'm startled as Brendon suddenly appears next to me, and I discreetly withdraw my hand from my pocket, setting it down awkwardly on my leg. "May I sit?" he asks, indicating the seat opposite me.

I shake my head. "No, I'm saving it for someone."

Brendon looks rather bewildered at my answer. It's almost as though he thinks it's completely outrageous for me to suggest that there is someone in this shithole that would willingly elect to share a table with me.

"Who?" he asks stupidly. Well, *everything* he said is stupid; he is stupid.

"Jesus," I say casually, and begin picking bits off the empty Styrofoam cup in front of me.

Brendon looks down at the seat as though Jesus is actually going to appear. "Oh," he says eventually. "Good joke."

I look up at him, wearing my best disgusted look. "Does my choice to believe in a deity and his son amuse you? I'm pretty sure it's illegal to discriminate on the basis of religious belief."

Brendon's professional demeanour disappears. He makes a big show of letting go of the back of the chair I'd saved for Jesus and then striding off. I grin to myself and move to pull my sketchbook back out. But, before I do, I make sure Misha is nowhere near me. If he dares to touch my things again I'll punch him in the eye socket. Why the eye socket? Because it fucking hurts like hell – Bert taught me that. I've just finished putting the shading onto my unfinished Frank picture when Brendon reappears. He sits down in Jesus' seat and raises an eyebrow.

"You're not religious," he says triumphantly. "You don't even believe in Jesus." He looks so proud of himself for figuring it out.

I shrug. I've managed to delay his sitting by almost five minutes, so I'm happy. I don't care that he knows I was lying about saving a seat for Jesus. I think it's my indifference to his gloating that irritates Brendon more. I don't understand how this man is a doctor. I personally won't consider him a doctor; he's more akin to pond scum in my opinion. I like the phrase 'pond scum.' It reminds me of a lot of people: Bert, Dr. Evil, Ray (okay, only *sometimes*), Dr. Leto….

“Gerard, I think we got off on the wrong foot,” Brendon says.

I ignore him.

“I’m working here at Brock full-time now. I’m going to be on your case for…well…for a long time, okay, Gerard? So, I think you need to start acknowledging me as a doctor. But, more importantly, you should start acknowledging me as someone who wants to help you.”

I make a loud scoffing noise before I can help it. Brendon is trying to be the bigger person here and I feel slightly guilty about mocking his attempts to bond with me. Brendon doesn’t look hurt though. In fact he looks invigorated.

“You don’t think I can help you?” he guesses as he tries to interpret the reason behind my jeering.

“Of course you can’t help me,” I tell him condescendingly. “Markman couldn’t, what makes you think you can?”

He doesn’t reply because he has no answer. I nod, satisfied, and use my index finger to artfully smudge a line on Frank’s forehead.

“How’s Frank?” he asks casually, pointing to my sketch.

I shoot him a filthy look. How the fuck would I know how Frank is?! Brendon must realise he’s crossed a line because he quickly stands up and leaves. Either that or he successfully interprets my filthy look as a warning about his imminent face reconstruction courtesy of my fist.

I’ve barely been alone for ten minutes before Dr. Evil comes along to inform me that a group therapy session is about to commence and my presence will be required. I roll my eyes and follow her over to where a ring of chairs has been assembled. I sit down cautiously in an empty chair, warily watching the other patients. They seem disinterested in my existence and attendance at the group session, much to my relief.

I will never admit out loud to anyone, but I’m scared. I’m frightened of the other patients. They are exponentially crazier than anyone I’ve encountered at Bluestone. I want to go back to Bluestone more than anything. I want to see Frank again and fall asleep next to him. Hell, I wouldn’t even be opposed to seeing Markman again. At least she doesn’t use magic to force me to share my feelings.

Dr. Evil’s extraction ability is the main reason why I’m exceedingly apprehensive about this session. I don’t want her to make me say

something in front of these nutcases that I'll regret. I wipe my sweaty palms on the blue cotton pants I'm wearing. I scowl at the faint smudge my dirty hands make on the material. Another thing I hate about this place is the complete lack of privileges I have. I have nothing. I can't go outside. I'm not allowed to get snacks from the cafeteria, and I'm not allowed to wear anything other than the standard issue clothes they'd given me on my first day. I'd woken up already wearing the light blue pyjama pants and the white shirt. I don't even know what happened to my jeans.

They were my favourite jeans. If I'd been awake when they took them I would've fought fiercely to keep them.

I'm also forced to wear slippers. I told every nurse and every orderly that would listen that I don't wear slippers but they didn't care. It was ridiculously unfair. You shouldn't have to "earn" clothing privileges. Decent, age appropriate clothing in mental institutions should be considered a basic regulation. I make a mental note to speak to my father about using his influence to create such a regulation.

Dr. Evil has begun the session already, but I'm not paying attention. Instead, I'm studying my fellow inmates. Misha is sitting very still in his chair, listening very intently to the doctor. His jet black hair is laden with an unnecessary amount of hair gel, which is doing little more than keeping several spikes vertical. Next to Misha is an older woman named Jess. I overheard her arguing with an orderly last week who thought it was unnecessary for her to take two servings of dinner with her back to her table every night. She quite clearly stated to the orderly that one was for her and one was for her husband who would be joining her shortly. Her husband was remarkably hungry for a man who'd been dead for twelve years.

"You're all going to die."

My head snaps up to stare at the tall young man who'd stood up and announced his prediction to the group. I don't know his name, but he is wearing a black shirt covered in grotesque pictures of real human skulls, so I decide to call him Skull.

Dr. Evil looks concerned at Skull's announcement. "Jonas, that is not appropriate," she says, and indicates for him to take his seat. His name is Jonas? What a stupid name. I decide to continue referring to him as Skull.

"Of course it's not appropriate, but it's true," Skull argues and remains

standing. He turns and starts pointing to each person in turn. “You’re gonna die.” He points to the next person. “You’re gonna die, too. And you.” He points at Jess. “You too. I’m going to kill you all.”

My mouth goes dry. Skull now seems like an incredibly appropriate name for this psychopath. Why is the doctor letting him threaten everyone? I swear if he points his bony finger at me I will snap it in half.

“Jonas, stop it. You’re not going to kill anyone.”

“I’m going to kill *everyone*,” Skull insists, and points to the next three people in the circle. I am next. If he dares to threaten me I’ll show him and everyone else how much of a mistake it is to mess with Gerard Way. “And I’m gonna kill you!” he says blatantly, jabbing his finger in my direction. I freeze. I don’t leap out of my seat and snap his finger like I planned. Fear keeps me glued to my seat. “And….” Skull stops suddenly and slowly turns back to look at me, as though he can sense my intense hatred for him. “Oh,” he says, his eyes growing incredibly wide. He looks surprised. “My mistake. I’m not going to kill you,” he says, speaking directly to me.

What the fuck is going on?

“No. I won’t get a chance to kill you. *They’re* going to get you first. Fuck that,” Skull grumbles. “So unfair.”

Without thinking, I launch myself out of my seat and throw myself at Skull with all the strength I can muster. I catch him by surprise, grabbing him by the throat and pin him up against the wall, pushing us out of the circle of chairs.

“How do you know about *Them*?!” I snarl, my hand compressing his windpipe as hard as I can. I am fully aware that I will get no answer whilst I’m choking him, but it feels too good to stop.

I’ve barely been holding his throat for a few seconds when hands wrench me back. I don’t fight; I hate being sedated. Being sedated fucks with my head for hours. Skull massages his neck gingerly and spits at me. “You scared, fag?” he rasps spitefully. “Are you scared because *They’re* gonna get you?” He runs his finger across his forehead, simulating slicing it open.

I lunge towards him again, but the orderlies pull me back and drag me off in the opposite direction. Everyone else in the circle is now standing, watching me with interested looks on their stupid faces. Dr.

Evil looks positively shocked. I bet she thought she had me all figured out. Nobody figures Gerard out.

“How do you know about *Them?* ” I shout as two orderlies grab at my arms with the intention of removing me from the room.

Skull doesn’t reply. He just sneers at me, one hand still clutching his throat.

I don’t struggle against the orderlies as they escort me back to my room. They lead me inside and sit me down on the piece of wood they pass off as a bed. “You going to behave yourself?” one of the orderlies asks.

I nod dutifully just so they won’t think it necessary to strap me to the bed. They leave, and I am left alone and terrified.

How the fuck does Skull know who *They*are? I have not told a single person in this place about *Them*. I haven’t even mentioned *Them* to Dr. Evil. Of course she knows about the *Them* situation, Markman would’ve written about it quite extensively in my file. But, is Skull *Their* spy? Is he the spy that Jasper warned me about? Is Skull one of *Them?* I lie down on my bed and curl up in the foetal position facing the wall. I spend a lot of time in this position. I want to be tough but really I’m a fucking pathetic piece of shit who’s destroyed his brother and lost the love of his life.

My door opens and my heart rate instantly increases as I irrationally consider that it could be *Them* coming in. I don’t dare roll over to look. My visitor sits down on the side of my bed. I decide that it is Dr. Evil, purely due to the fact that her petite frame barely lowers the side of the bed at all.

“Gerard,” Dr. Evil begins. I feel triumphant that I’ve successfully guessed who it is. I keep my eyes shut and don’t acknowledge that she has spoken. “You should not take Jonas’ threats seriously. He has been threatening to hurt people every single day since he arrived over two years ago and yet he has never done anything more than squash an ant. You don’t need to be afraid of him.”

She has it all wrong. I’m not afraid of Skull. I’m afraid of *Them.* I can deal with Skull. I can deal with him calling me a ‘fag.’ But, I can’t deal with the fact that he knows that *They* are coming to kill me. I can’t deal with the fact that Jasper was right. I am going to die. Soon. I know I am. I know things, remember?

“Gerard?”

I lie very still until Dr. Evil leaves the room. Maybe she thinks I’ve fallen asleep? I don’t know. I don’t care. All I care about is staying alive…and Frank.

I eventually end up falling asleep. I don’t dream. I haven’t had a dream in a long time. I’m not sad about that fact – my dreams usually involve blood or dead brothers or dead lovers. I awake suddenly to the sound of someone calling to me. They’re telling me that I have a visitor. I decide it must be a mistake. I don’t get visitors. Frank is on the other side of the country and no one else cares about me.

I pretend to still be asleep and eventually the nurse disappears. Maybe she’ll tell my visitor to come back. I wonder if my visitor will be Lindsey. Maybe Lindsey is here to prepare me for my murder trial? The door opens again a short time later and I hear the sound of expensive leather shoes tapping against the linoleum on the floor. The person sits down on the edge of my bed, too, but definitely outweighs Dr Evil.

“Gerard?”

My father is my visitor. What a surprise. I won’t call it a pleasant surprise. I’ve decided that I’m not particularly fond of my father – he’s practically condemned me to die by sending me to this place. I ignore him as well. I much prefer to pretend to be asleep than converse with him.

My father grasps my shoulder firmly and rolls me over so I’m on my back and looking up at him. I’m not expecting this sudden action and I instinctively open my eyes. I take one look at his judgemental face and try to roll back over. He isn’t pleased with me for doing that.

“Gerard,” he scolds, and pins my shoulder against the mattress so I can’t move. “Don’t be rude.”

I don’t make a retort or roll my eyes. I just stare up at him, defeated.

“How are you?”

“Fine,” I lie. I am not fine. I am going to die soon. I wonder if I will have a chance to say goodbye to Frank. Maybe I should write him a letter.

My father realises suddenly that he’s holding my shoulder very tightly

and lets go. I roll back over to face the wall.

“Oh, Gerard,” my father sighs, frustrated. “I was advised that you might not be ready to see me again.”

“Were these advisors the same people that advised you to forget about me while I was in Bluestone?” I ask suddenly, looking back over my shoulder.

My father looks uncomfortable. “I didn’t forget about you. I was advised that your recovery would be easier if I wasn’t around.”

I bite my lip and shake my head, betrayed. “Of course you did. Thank goodness you have someone to think for you. Oh, hey, what do they advise you to have for breakfast tomorrow?’ I ask sarcastically. “Or, what if they advise you to have eggs, but you feel like cereal? Do you *have* to have the eggs?”

My father knows he deserved it. He’d deserted me. “Gerard, I’m so sorry.”

“I never had a single visitor. Ever. You know, I actually thought I was orphan with no family who’d been left in the care of the state. But all this time I was your son, and you never came to see me.”

An uncomfortable silence falls. I will never forgive my father for abandoning me. Of course he had every right to, considering what I’d done to Mikey, but it doesn’t make it hurt any less.

“I’ve got to go,” my father says, breaking the silence. He touches my shoulder gently. “Is there anything I can get you?”

I decide to seize the opportunity and ask about my clothes. “Can you make them let me wear my old clothes?” I ask.

“Oh, no, Gerard, that is something you’ve got to earn. I’m sure you will get your old clothes back as soon as you earn it. No more fights,” he says light-heartedly.

I sigh and tug on the itchy cotton shirt. “I can’t wear these,” I object.

“What’s wrong with them?”

“They’re itchy and they’re ugly.”

“So? Behave and you’ll get jeans in no time.”

I don't have time. I'm going to die. I'll be damned if I die wearing a pair of slippers. "I don't want to die in these clothes," I say crankily.

My father looks alarmed. "Gerard, you're not going to die. Why would you say that?"

I raise an eyebrow at him. "Yes, I am. *They're* going to get me any day now."

My father becomes very confused. "*Them?* Gerard, no! No! *They're* not real. Okay? *They're* a delusion. *They're* the reason you hurt Mikey. Remember? *They* are not going to hurt you because *They're* not real. Okay?"

I don't expect my father to understand. No one understands. *They* are real. *They* are coming to get my secrets and there is no stopping it. Even Skull knows there is no stopping it. *They* are going to get my secrets and the world was going to end.

I pause suddenly, a brilliant idea shooting through my head. I might not be able to stop *Them* and I sure as hell will be useless against stopping *Their* brutal entry into my brain. But I can control what happens after they get my secrets. I can stop the world from ending. I can't save myself, but I can save the world.

My father leaves, and I resume my staring at the wall. I know I can stop the world from ending – I'm just not sure how I will do it.

I don't leave my room for dinner that night, or for breakfast the next morning, and it takes the nurse threatening to put a red dot next to my name before I drag myself to the cafeteria for lunch. Red dots are the worst thing you can get in this place. White dots are the best. If you get fifty white dots, you move up a category and get awarded a privilege. If you get more than five red dots, all of your white dots get erased; you move down a category and lose a privilege. I already have three red dots and even though I don't have any privileges to lose, I don't particularly want to be that guy that reached five red dots in his first week.

White dots are awarded for everything from using manners to helping clean up the art room. I only have one of them and Brendon only gave it to me when he saw me pick up a piece of trash up off the floor. I'd only picked up the piece of trash because I thought it might've been a note one of the other patients had written. I was hoping there would be some gossip on it I could use as leverage. I'd received my red dots for choking Skull, swearing at Brendon and throwing my slippers out

the tiny bathroom window on my first day.

They ended up giving me a new pair of slippers straight away so my efforts to dispose of the shoes went to waste, but it was still worth it. I really want to know what the gardener thought when he found them in the shrubs.

I eat my lunch as quickly as I can and kept my eyes down the entire time. I know people are looking at me. There isn't a lot of excitement in this place; I'd figured that much out in the first twenty-four hours. My fight with Skull yesterday is probably the most entertaining thing that's happened in a while.

As soon as I've forced the peanut butter sandwich down my throat, I stand up and make my way back to my room. I'm only metres from the door when someone jumps in front of me, blocking my path.

"Hey!" I don't understand how *anyone* can be anything other than miserable in this prison. This kid's enthusiasm makes me ill.

I try to step around the kid but he moves with me. I take a deep breath and try to stare him down. "Move," I demand rudely.

"I'm Pedro," he says and sticks out his hand. I blink at him. I'm not here to make friends, especially not with someone named Pedro.

I take another step to the right but Pedro mimics me, still intent on stopping me from passing. "Fuck off," I say angrily.

"What's your name?" Pedro persists, his hand still extended in a greeting gesture. "If you tell me I'll let you pass."

I consider his acne-covered face. Is he lying? Will telling him my name be detrimental? He should already know who I am. My name is up on the Dot board for all to see. My name is the one with all the red dots next to it. You certainly can't miss it.

"Gerard," I say bluntly.

Pedro grins. "Nice to meet you, Gerard," he says and pushes his hand out further, seeking a handshake. I don't see the harm in shaking his hand so I firmly place my hand in his and shake it hard, trying to intimidate him. Pedro suddenly reaches out with his other hand, gripping my wrist and pulling me off-balance, tilting towards him. He wrenches my hand free and holds it tightly, his dull eyes studying my palm intently.

“What the fuck?” I object, and snatch my hand back.

Pedro looks frustrated. “I just wanna read your palm,” he says, and reaches out to take my hand again. I hurriedly stick my hands in the pockets of my pyjamas.

“Fuck off,” I say bitterly, and start to walk away.

“It’s called Palmistry. It’s a legitimate art,” Pedro informs me, jogging to resume his place in front of me. He shoves his palm into my face. “See that line?” he asks and runs his finger down the centre of his palm. “It’s called the Line of Heart. It tells you all about your emotions, especially love. Have you ever been in love? I bet I can tell from looking at that line.”

I pause and look down at Pedro and his infectious enthusiasm. Palmistry is a complete joke. Surely you can’t tell if someone is in love from a line on their hand? “Go on then,” I say patronisingly, and present him with my left hand.

Pedro holds my hand tightly and runs his fingers softly down my palm. “See that one?” he says, his fingers deftly tracing the top line on my palm. “That’s your Heart line.” He looks up at me and smiles. “You’re in love,” he says resolutely.

“Yes,” I admit awkwardly.

“With a boy,” Pedro continues.

My eyes widen. “You can tell that from my palm?” I say, astonished.

Pedro looks amused. “No. Jonas called you a fag. That only means one thing around here, you know?”

“Fuck Jonas,” I grunt, embarrassed, and pull my hand away.

Pedro snatches my hand back. “I’m not done,” he says disapprovingly and goes back to studying my palm. “Now this next one is your life line. It tells you when you’re gonna die.” He lets go of my hand to show me his. “See?” he says and points out his own lifeline. “This tells me that I’m going to live to be sixty-seven. I’m going to die of a myocardial infarction.”

I’m ninety-five percent convinced that Pedro is full of shit. The other five percent is dubious but incredibly curious. I am going to die soon. Nobody knows that except me. If Pedro is a legitimate palm reader,

he'll be able to tell me how soon I am going to die. I present my palm to Pedro and request he read my life line.

Pedro looks concerned. "Gerard, most people don't want to know when they're going to die. Or how. It's heavy stuff, man. It'll cut you up. I told Mel she was going to die in exactly one week and guess what happened a week later? She *died*."

"Do it," I order.

Pedro reluctantly holds my palm and examines it. Then, after about a minute he freaks out. He drops my hand like it's a grenade and steps away from me fearfully.

My own fear escalates. "What?" I say urgently. "What did it say?"

Pedro clutches his head. "Gerard!" he says in a panic. "You don't have one!"

"What the fuck does that mean?" I demand, my heart beating rapidly. I stare down at my palms, seeking answers.

Pedro looks around nervously. "Gerard, you don't have a life line."

Is Pedro saying that I was already dead to begin with? Am I a zombie? I don't understand.

"Death is coming for you, Gerard!" Pedro starts running away from me like I'm going to kill him. He glances back at me only once.

"Wait!" I call and hurry after him. "How am I going to die?" I beg. I need to know. I want to be ready.

Pedro hesitates for a second. "Your brain is going to *explode*, Gerard. I'm so sorry." He runs off, leaving me standing outside my room in shock.

I take a step sideways to support myself against the wall. My knees have gone weak and I feel faint. My brain is going to explode. Even Pedro knows that *They* are coming to cut into my brain. I don't have a lifeline; I'm already dead. I quickly haul myself to my feet and go looking for Dr. Evil. I need to convince her to transfer me to another facility. I need more time to think of a way to hide from *Them* forever.

Brock is very different to Bluestone in that the doctors are not readily accessible. At Bluestone I could march into Markman's office

whenever I liked. But at Brock I have to speak to a receptionist.

“Do you have an appointment?” the receptionist asks, looking at me over the rims of her glasses.

“No, but it’s urgent. I need to see the doctor. Immediately. It’s a matter of life or death.” Literally.

The receptionist shakes her head. “I’m sorry, Dr. Morgan isn’t available right now. Would you like to leave her a message?”

“No!” I say crossly and stamp my foot on the ground like a child. “Please, just five minutes.”

“What’s the matter, Gerard?” I glance up to see Dr. Evil looking at me from her office doorway. I force myself to calm down. I take a breath. “I need to talk to you.”

Dr. Evil nods. “Okay, come in,” she says pleasantly and beckons me forward.

I heave a huge sigh of relief and hurry into the room. I take my seat on the leather couch. Dr. Evil pulls a chair closer to me and sits down.

“I’m quite surprised you wanted to talk to me,” she says. “You’ve not shown any interest in it in the past.”

“I need to be transferred,” I say bluntly, ignoring her jab at my usual lack of participation in therapy.

“Ah,” Dr. Evil says, nodding as though she had been expecting me to say that. “Because *They’re* coming to get you? Correct?” She’s mocking me. She doesn’t understand how powerful *They* are as an organisation. She doesn’t understand that the world is at stake here.

“Yes,” I answer, my hands twisting together painfully. “How did you know?”

“Your father told me that you were under the impression that *They* were coming to harm you,” she says, her eyes drilling into me.

How dare he tell her anything! He has no right. I push the urge to complain about him down. I have more important things to discuss. “So, when can I transfer? I’ll go anywhere.”

“I’m not transferring you,” Dr. Evil says.

I shut my eyes and count to ten. Once I open them I repeat, “I want to transfer. When can I leave?”

Dr. Evil shakes her head. “You’re not going anywhere, Gerard. I’m sorry.”

I mutter a stream of curse words under my breath. This is a disaster. Why doesn’t she understand what was going to happen?

“Gerard, I want you to read something.” Dr. Evil pulls a piece of paper from a drawer in her desk. She hands it to me. I read the first few lines in disgust:

‘Types of Schizophrenia: Paranoid Schizophrenia - These persons are very suspicious of others and often have grand schemes of persecution at the root of their behaviour. Hallucinations, and more frequently delusions, are a prominent and common part of the illness.’

“Sound familiar, Gerard? Grand schemes of persecution? Remind you of anything?”

“If you’re referring to Them, you’re wrong,” I say spitefully.

“Am I?” Dr. Evil asks. “Has anyone else ever seen *Them*, Gerard? You claimed that *They’ve* visited you several times now. Why did no one else ever see *Them*? Gerard, you described *Them* as an army of soldiers. Why has no one else ever seen an army of soldiers traipsing around the facility?”

Isn’t it obvious? “People are blinded by their own problems. Why would they care about mine?” I say.

“Yet, Frank never saw *Them* either? Wasn’t Frank there on one occasion when you thought *They* had found you? Weren’t you holding him when *They* put a gun to his head?’ Why didn’t he see *Them*? He cares about you. He cares about your problems. He should’ve seen *Them*. Yet, he didn’t. Maybe he didn’t see *Them* because *They* were never there to begin with?”

My eyes are wet with tears. I don’t want to listen to this. I don’t know why Frank never saw *Them*. I’ve never thought about it before. He was always telling me *They* weren’t real. Maybe they weren’t. “Why did I see *Them* if they weren’t really there?” I ask. I’m so confused. I don’t understand. I am so ridiculously crazy. I don’t know what is real anymore.

“Because you have a mental illness called schizophrenia. You have hallucinations. *They* are a hallucination. Jasper is a hallucination.”

“But Pedro said…” I begin and Dr. Evil looks exasperated.

“Did he say you were going to die?” she asks.

How does she know that? I nod cautiously.

“Pedro told me I was going to be mauled to death by a bear whilst camping when I was thirty-five years old. Guess how old I am now, Gerard?” she asks.

I wonder if it’s a trick question. I don’t want to say an age that’s too extreme. I don’t want her to be mad at me for saying she looks older than she is. I shrug instead.

Dr. Evil folds her arms. “I’m turning thirty-eight in about two months time. I’ve never seen a bear in my entire life and I hate camping.”

“So?”

“So? Pedro makes things up. He lies. He likes to scare people by telling them when they’re going to die. Did he tell you how he himself was going to die? He told me he was going to die at the hands of modern day metropolitan cannibals. Very imaginative.”

He told me he was going to die of a heart attack. That little fucking dickhead. How dare he make shit up about me? I glance down at my palm and at the lines. I don’t know which one is my lifeline, but it probably wasn’t nonexistent like Pedro had claimed. Maybe I’m not already dead after all.

“Let’s not get distracted now, Gerard. Do you understand what I mean when I say you have Schizophrenia?”

I shake my head. “I don’t want to talk about this,” I say, placing my hands over my ears. I don’t want to hear her say that word again: Schizophrenia. It is all Markman ever talked about. It was always: I have this disease or I have an illness. She had really been trying to tell me I was defective – but I wasn’t. My brain is perfect – that’s why I was chosen to keep the secrets. I would never have been chosen if a disease affected my brain.

“Gerard,” Dr. Evil says gently, and pulls my hands away from the sides of my head.

“Are you going to transfer me?” I ask. Dr. Evil shakes her head. I stand up. “I’m going back to my room,” I say, and walk out. I pause at the door and looked back at her. “To die,” I add for dramatic effect.

I spend the next three days in my bed curled up and facing the wall. I wait for *Them*. Dr. Evil comes and sees me almost ten times. She tries everything to try to get me to leave my bed but I refuse. I am going to wait here until the end.

I have resigned myself to it now. I haven’t the slightest clue of how I am going to save the world, but I don’t care too much about it anyway. I still haven’t written my letter to Frank either. I wonder if he thinks about me as much as I’m thinking about him. Probably not.

As I lay in my resigned state, fighting sleep, I decide to search back through my memories. I find one from my first few weeks at Bluestone. We had been watching a movie. I couldn’t remember the title. All I knew was that it was a horrible romantic comedy. There was one scene, however, that stuck in my brain. The lead female character had fallen asleep on the bed and her love interest had come over and I remembered very clearly that he woke her up by kissing her devotedly on the lips. Then she woke up and they lived happily ever after. It was a shit movie.

I used to think that things in movies never happened in real life. But I was obviously wrong. Why was I wrong? Because Frank is kissing me awake right now. Even though my eyes are closed I know it is him. I can smell him. He smells amazing.

I open my eyes and wrap my arms around Frank, hugging him impossibly tight. I pull him off me and lay him down on the mattress. Then I lay down almost on top of him, kissing him properly. I stop only long enough to ask him, “Why are you here?”

He shrugs. “Dr. Morgan told Dr. Markman that you were really depressed. Then Dr. Markman told me that you were really depressed, and that maybe I should come to visit you. And I said yes.”

“I’m not depressed,” I object weakly. I could be, I have no idea. I will deny it anyway.

Frank bites his lip. “Well, you are talking about the fact that you’re going to die, Gerard. That’s pretty depressing.”

“It’s true.”

Frank doesn't reply or argue. He just grabs the back of my head and pulls me in closer so he can kiss me again.

"How are you?" I interrupt. It's not that I don't want to lie here forever and make out with Frank. It's more that I have a lot of things I need to discuss with Frank before he has to leave. He can't stay long. Visiting times in this place are very short, especially for people like me who have no privileges.

Frank nods. "I'm good," he says.

"Don't lie," I warn, and Frank looks annoyed.

"So I'm not allowed to be good?" he says.

"You're allowed to say you're good when you're not." There is no way he can possibly be good. When I last saw him he was still very broken.

Frank pushes me off him and sits up. "How do you know how I am? You don't know anything about how I've been for the past two weeks."

"That's exactly the point!" I insist. "It's only been two weeks. Nothing can happen in two weeks."

Frank looks angry. "A lot can happen in two weeks," he objects.

I don't believe him. "Like what?" Maybe he made a new friend. Maybe he met someone new. Maybe this person was more than a friend. Maybe he'd found someone new to love.

"A lot, okay?"

I just nod. I had failed. He is still so broken. I thought I'd managed to fix him but I'd failed. I failed just like I failed at everything else I'd ever done. I was even going to fail as a secret keeper.

"What's wrong?" Frank asks. He's good at figuring out when I'm in pain.

I sit up against the wall, pulling my legs up to my chest. "I failed." I'm such a loser. I don't know why Frank came here to visit me. I don't understand why he would come and see me at all. I told him that I could fix him and he let me fuck him, trusting that it was the only way to fix him.

Frank suddenly grabs my hand and presses it to his chest. "What are

you –?" I say. Last time someone grabbed my hand I ended up finding out my brain was going to explode.

"Shhh!" he says loudly, and places two fingers over my lips. "Do you feel that?" he asks. He shuffles closer to me so my arm isn't stretched as awkwardly.

At this exact moment I'm really quite baffled as to what Frank is trying to convey to me. I shake my head but it doesn't put Frank off. Instead he removes my hand from his chest just long enough to lift up his shirt. Then he presses my hand to his chest again, but this time there is no clothing between our skins. "Do you feel that?" he asks again.

"I can feel your heart beat?" I say slowly, confused.

Frank smiles. "Exactly."

"Huh?"

"My heart is beating, Gerard."

I nod. "Well, yeah, if it wasn't you'd be dead," I say sensibly.

Frank sighs. "Gerard, I've been waiting for my heart to start beating again for almost two years."

Oh. *Oh*. He hadn't been talking in the literal sense. I feel rather stupid.

"I've been waiting for as long as I can remember. It stopped because I felt like I'd died. I felt so disgusting and dirty and ashamed and abused and my body shut down. I didn't want to live anymore and I felt like my heart just stopped as a result. It's been stopped so long that I thought it was going to stay that way forever." He looked thoroughly miserable as he revisited the memory. He poked me in the arm. "But then you came along with your *stupid* theories and your stupid face and you kept doing things to me!" He pushed my hand harder up against his chest. "You came along and you kept making it beat for a few seconds and for those precious seconds I would feel alive. But then it would stop and I'd go back to being dead again."

I slowly raise my free hand to touch his cheek.

"Then it started again. Don't you remember? You asked me if my chest was hurting? It wasn't hurting. It was the best feeling in the whole world. Gerard, I'm not dead anymore. I can feel my heart all the time.

I feel alive, *all the time*. Gerard, you…."

"I fixed you," I say in disbelief.

"*Yes*," Frank says quietly. "Gerard, I'm *good*. I'm going to be okay."

I reach out and pull Frank into my arms. I don't think Frank knows truly how much it means to me to hear him say that. I'm not going to die worrying about Frank anymore and that comforts me immensely.

Frank hugs me back, tighter than he ever had before. He is hugging me goodbye. "Markman is discharging me," he mumbles into my chest.

I don't have anything to say. Instead I press my lips to the side of his head and hope he won't see the tiny tear that is slowly trickling down my cheek. I have fixed him. I had broken Mikey but I have fixed Frank. I feel like I have repaid some sort of karmic debt to the universe. I must've known all along what I had done to Mikey. It must be why I was so intent on finding a way to fix Frank. All this time I have been trying to find a way to forgive myself for breaking Mikey.

"I love you."

I pull Frank away from where he had buried his face in my chest and kiss him. I don't care that he can see my stupid tears and my weakness. I love him more than anything. I fixed him.

"I love you," Frank repeats, his lips still pressed to my own. It's him who had said it the first time. He loves me.

Frank stays wrapped around me until the nurse comes to make him leave. Now he's standing by the door, his hair tousled and his shirt bunched up around his waist.

"Bye, Gerard," he says sadly.

"I love you," I remind him and he smiles blissfully.

"See you later?" he asks, opening the door.

I shake my head. I won't see him later. Frank bites his lip and nods. "That's right," he says, remembering my disclosure about my impending death. "Well, just know that I love you, okay? I love you and I'm going to be okay. Okay?"

I nod. Frank stands up on his tiptoes to kiss me one last time before

leaving.

I touch the door, pining like a teenage girl. My heart feels as though it is simply too full to break, but I can feel small cracks forming already. I don't have time to dwell on my last ever encounter with Frank, as I see my shadow against the door flicker as though someone has crossed in front of the window, blocking the light.

I spin around, my eyes searching the window fearfully. Several more dark shapes dart across in front of the glass. One figure lingers just long enough for me to see his white mask. My mouth goes dry and my heart rate doubles, but I don't freeze. I suddenly know how I'm going to save the world. I know things, remember?

I wrench open my sketchbook and set my pencil down onto the paper. I write down exactly twenty-four words. These twenty-four words are going to save the world. I scramble back to my feet and open my door. I've barely taken three steps towards Dr. Evil's office when someone calls my name.

I spin around to see Markman walking towards me. I have never been so happy to see that woman before in my entire life. I walk to meet her, still clutching my piece of paper tightly in my hand.

"Gerard," Markman says amiably. I figure she is pleased to see me out of my bed.

I have no time for niceties. I fold the piece of paper up into a square about half the size of a playing card and hold it out to her. "Do not open this or read this until after I die," I order.

Markman looks surprised. "Pardon?" she says, glancing down at the piece of paper.

I push it into her hand. "Please do not read this until after I'm dead. If you read it before it'll ruin everything. Do you understand?"

Markman touches my arm. "Gerard, why are you talking about dying?"

"Promise me!" I exclaim, and glance around nervously. *They* are coming. *They* were outside. I have no more time.

Markman accepts the piece of paper cautiously. "What is this?" she asks.

“Do not read it until I’m gone. Do you understand?”

She nods. “Of course,” she says. “But Gerard, you know you are going to outlive me by many decades, I’ll never get a chance to read it. I’ll be gone when it’s eventually your turn.”

“My turn is tonight,” I says firmly and start walking away. Markman follows me into the cafeteria. I see Skull sitting at one of the tables. He looks up at me and smirks.

I know at that moment that he is *Their* spy. He is the one Jasper warned me about. I am going to kill him before *They* kill me.

“Gerard!” Markman is persistent. I’d forgotten how persistent she is. Normally I can deal with it, but right now? I’m ready to push her to the ground. “What is this? If you don’t tell me, I’ll open it.”

I know she’s probably suspicious that the paper is a suicide note. She probably thinks that with all my talk about dying, I’m planning to off myself. I would never kill myself. I could never do that to Frank; that would be selfish. But, I don’t want her to read it so I turn to face her.

“It’s one of my secrets,” I say in a low voice so Skull won’t hear.

Markman’s eyebrows shoot up in surprise. “And you’re entrusting one to me? Why?”

“Because you are the only one who can handle it. You’re strong and you’re intelligent. Frank wasn’t ready. I couldn’t burden him. I’m sorry to burden you, doctor, but I couldn’t let *Them* get them all. If that happened….” I pause and shot a venomous look at Skull. “The world would end and everyone would die. Frank would die. I didn’t want him to die.”

“Gerard, no one is going to die.”

“*He* is,” I say, before throwing myself at Skull. Skull is waiting for me. He’s been waiting for me for weeks. He leaps to his feet as I run towards him. I clench my hands into fists and smash one into Skull’s face. He is knocked backwards. I don’t have a knife or a gun so I will have to make do with my hands. I am *very* good with my hands. Skull leaps back to his feet with his arms raised protectively in front of his face. I swing out with my right fist again but I don’t get a chance to do any damage. Someone has grabbed a hold of my biceps and is tugging me backwards. I twist around, trying to escape their grip and only manage to succeed in hurting myself. Skull has not yet been restrained

and he takes a step towards me. He grabs the side of my head and smashes it down hard onto the metal table. The ensuing blackness is terrifying.

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When I awake, I can't move my arms. I can feel them but I am strapped so tightly to the bed I can barely move an inch. I try to move my legs but find them tightly restrained as well. I have no idea where I am. The room is completely empty except for the bed and me. The walls are white plaster and the roof is high. The solitary window in the room is up high as well, completely unreachable by a human. This would comfort me if it weren't for the fact that *They* aren't human. My head isn't throbbing at all. This surprises me. I expected to be in a lot of pain after Skull smashed my head into that table. Fucking dickhead. At least I managed to get one good punch in before his friend stepped into to restrain me. His nose was bleeding – maybe I'd broken it? The thought pleases me. A broken nose will suit his ugly, traitorous face.

I shut my eyes for a minute. Frank is going to be okay. I could see it in his eyes. He is alive again. I have done that. I have fixed him. I open my eyes and am not surprised to see Jasper leaning against the wall.

"You," I say bitterly. I have been waiting for him.

"Me," he says haughtily and looks up.

I follow his gaze and flinch as glass falls from the shattered window above my head. I listen to the shards as they fall to the ground, and watch as *They* start slithering through the window and down to the ground. They look exactly like I remember. Yet, I'm not afraid as I watch *Them* fill every inch of the room with their dark bulky forms and featureless faces. I'm not afraid because I know I have beaten *Them.* They don't know it yet but I have and it allays any fears that I might've had.

Their leader steps forward from the masses and stands at the side of my bed. He smirks at me, the lips on his mask twisting into position.

"Hello, Gerard," he says softly in his unforgettable raspy voice. I see Jasper sneer in the background. "Are you afraid?" he asks as he leisurely slips a scalpel from a pocket on his bulletproof vest.

I shake my head and his smirk wavers. He recovers quickly though and lightly touches the scalpel to my forehead.

“You’re wasting your time,” I force myself to say. I lied before. I am scared. I am terrified. I am pretty sure I am going to wet myself. I’ve faced *Them* before, but I’ve never been so helpless and never this fucked.

“Oh?” the leader says, amused, and runs his gloved finger down my cheek.

“I gave one away,” I say and shoot Jasper a vindictive look.

The leader’s smile vanishes completely. “You’re lying,” he says immediately and turns to look at Jasper.

Jasper steps forward and points his finger at me. “You’re lying. You would never give one away! I told you that you would die if you ever told anyone. Two people cannot know the same secret! You’re lying. You’d be dead if you’d given one away.”

“Well,” I say stonily. “I guess you’ll have to have a look and see, won’t you?”

The leader immediately steps forward and grabs a handful of my hair to keep my head still. Then he slides the scalpel across my skin like he is cutting into butter.

It is the worst pain I have ever felt in my entire life. It feels like I am being kicked repeatedly in the head. The pain is throbbing unbearably through to the back of my skull. My consciousness keeps wavering erratically as the leader cuts his way in and starts to pull out the precious secrets I have been protecting my entire life. I feel the nausea rise up suddenly and I barely have enough time to turn my head and vomit onto the pillow. The leader seems possessed as he searches through my head. I know he is counting the secrets but he won’t be able to count them all. He is never going to find number nine. Number nine is gone. It is currently in the possession of Markman. She hasn’t read it yet, but as soon as she finds out I’m dead she will, and the secret will have been passed onto someone else.

Do I feel guilty about endangering Markman by giving her the secret? Yes, I feel ridiculously guilty. But she is the only other option. I could never have given one to Frank. These secrets take up all my energy and in the end, they’ve taken my life. I could never do that to Frank. I love him too much. Markman can look after herself. Plus, Jasper

thinks that I hate Markman, and he would never suspect that I would entrust one of my secrets to her. Without *all* the secrets, *They* can't do a thing. The world is safe. Frank is safe.

The leader roars in fury as he realises that I haven't lied. I don't know how much longer I'm going to be able to force myself to stay awake. I keep falling deeper and more sporadically into unconsciousness. I feel like I am free falling into darkness, even though my body is strapped impossibly tight to the bed. Then just when I think I'm going to descend into the eternal darkness, I jerk awake to the sound of Jasper and the leader arguing violently. The rest of *Them* are moving restlessly in their perfect rows as they too realise that their two-decade long search has come to an abrupt and unfavourable end.

Every time I jerk awake it's like I have reached the end of a bungee cord. I blink rapidly and my heart beats frantically as it struggles to cope. My eyes water from the severity of the pain. I desperately wish I would stop jerking back into consciousness. I wish the bungee cord would just snap.

Their leader looms in my face. "Where is it?" he shouts, and grasps my chin tightly to make me look at him. I blink furiously, not quite comprehending his words. I struggle feebly, but suddenly realise that the entire left side of my body has gone worryingly numb. I can't control the left side of my face at all and my vision keeps blurring. I feel strange. I can feel the tears spilling from my eyes. I don't understand what is happening to me.

I do understand, however, that I am dying.

The leader keeps yelling and screaming in my face but I can't make myself understand what he is saying. It sounds like he is speaking another language. I'm not afraid of him anymore.

I fall again but this time I realised that I'm not falling anymore; I'm being pulled down. *They* are pulling me down into the eternal darkness. My brain keeps pulling me back up but I know it can't keep it up forever. Eventually my brain will give up. When that happens *They* will have me. Forever.

I smile to myself as I think of Frank. I think about him as that bungee cord finally snaps and I fall. This time I know I'm not going to jerk back up. My brain has given up. This time *They* have me. I know *They* have me. I *know* I'm not going to wake back up. Not this time. Not ever. I know it.

I know things.

Remember?

Epilogue - Twenty-Four Words

Frank was running late. He hesitated at the edge of the road, glancing to the left to check for oncoming cars. Despite the fact he was only twenty feet away from a pedestrian crossing, he chose to dodge his way across the road and onto the footpath on the other side. He hurried on, crossing his arms protectively in front of his torso as an icy gust of wind engulfed him.

Court had run unusually late today much to Frank's annoyance. He had specifically made plans for this afternoon and now they were thrown into disarray. He shivered again as another gust of wind swept past him and whipped a piece of litter into his face. He brushed the chocolate wrapper aside and heaved a sigh of relief as he spotted the familiar siren that graced the Starbucks logo. He stepped inside the store and scanned the room as the store's heating began to defrost him.

Dr. Markman had only been waiting for Frank for just over five minutes. She had been running late herself and had only just managed to settle down into a booth in the overcrowded coffee shop. She swept her hair up into a messy ponytail and jumped slightly as someone brushed against her table, startling her. She shot a wary look at the young man as he continued carelessly on his way and as she did she could've sworn she'd seen the exact same man just ten minutes ago at the bank. She frowned slightly as she realised that the young man who had just bumped her table was indeed the same young man who had been lined up behind her as she deposited a cheque into her account. In fact, he was the same young man who had been seated at the table next to her at the seafood restaurant she had eaten at yesterday with her husband.

Markman suddenly wondered if this silent young man with the shaved head and the strong, foreign features was following her. She watched him for a moment as he sat alone at another table in the crowded coffee shop before sitting back and laughing to herself as she realised how paranoid she had obviously become. She needed a vacation. Markman knew she needed to get away from everything before her paranoia got any worse.

The feeling had started just over a year ago, the very moment one of her former patients handed her a piece of paper about half the size of a playing card. It was only a very mild feeling but sometimes

Markman would shiver for no reason as though someone with dishonourable intentions was watching her.

“Hey, Doc,” Frank greeted Markman energetically and sat down opposite her in the booth. “Sorry I’m late.”

Markman waved the apology aside, not wishing to mention she had not been waiting long herself due to the fact she had purposely taken a different, longer route into the city this afternoon purely because she had thought the older man with the shaved head in the car behind her was following her and she needed to lose him amongst the traffic.

“How are you, Frank?” Markman asked, a high level of concern apparent in her voice.

Frank shrugged and nodded. “Good,” he said.

Dr. Markman nodded herself. “That’s good,” she said encouragingly. “I haven’t seen you in a while.”

Frank felt guilty at what was meant to be an offhand comment. There was a very good reason why Markman had not seen him in a while. He had been purposely avoiding her at every given opportunity since the funeral. He had been discharged from Bluestone on the same day and since then he had used every single possible excuse available to avoid having to tell explain to her why he was doing what he was doing.

“How’s court going?” Markman continued her questioning, unaware of Frank’s guilt over her previous comment.

Frank swallowed uncomfortably. “Okay,” he said indifferently, not willing to admit how petrified he was of his upcoming need to testify. The only thing that comforted him was the fact that he was going to put two very bad men in jail. “Doc, I don’t mean to be rude but I’ve gotta be somewhere at two,” he said awkwardly and glanced at his watch. It wasn’t a lie. He did genuinely need to be somewhere at two. However, he had planned the thing at two as a way to escape his coffee appointment with his former therapist. “Why did you want to see me?”

Markman was completely aware the Frank was uncomfortable. She hadn’t called him and asked him to meet her for nothing. She pulled a piece of paper from her jeans pocket and set it down on the table in front of Frank. Frank raised an eyebrow at the tightly folded piece of sketchbook paper. He picked it up and unfolded it. As he did he

noticed the creases were extremely worn, as though the previous owner of the paper had folded and unfolded the paper hundreds of times.

As Frank read the paper, Markman watched him intently, looking for any reaction that might betray his feelings. However, instead of looking enlightened, Frank looked confused. He raised an eyebrow at Markman.

“What is this?” he asked and re-read the twenty-four words again.

Markman was dismayed. Her face reflected a mere fraction of the crushing disappointment she felt inside. “It doesn’t mean anything to you?” she asked desperately as she struggled to come to terms with Frank’s reaction to the note.

Frank shook his head slowly. “Should it?” he asked, confused.

Markman sighed. “I hoped it would. I don’t understand what it means.”

“Well, what is it?” Frank asked again, his curiosity at a high.

Markman sat back. She didn’t know it she dared to tell Frank. It would hurt him, no doubt. But, it was also going to do more good then she could possibly imagine. “It was one of his secrets.” She didn’t know if she was even supposed to tell Frank about it’s existence but she couldn’t bear not knowing what it meant any longer.

Frank’s first reaction was of anger. He held the piece of paper tightly between his trembling fingers and glared accusingly at his former therapist. “Why would you give this to me?” he asked viciously.

“Do you know what it means, Frank?”

“Why would you give this to me?!” Frank exclaimed and dropped the paper as frustration swept over him.

Markman kept her composure and pushed the paper back towards Frank. “Frank, does this mean nothing to you?”

“Why are you doing this to me?” Frank asked. “I’m fine.”

“Don’t lie, Frank.”

Frank stood up and brandished his finger at Markman. “I am fine. *You* let me out. I’m fine.”

Markman stood up to meet Frank but she was not angry like he was. No, Dr. Markman was desperate. She held the paper out to Frank again. “Frank, are you absolutely sure that this means absolutely nothing to you?!” she repeated urgently.

Frank snatched the paper from her hands and waved it widely. “It’s nonsense!” he said vindictively. “It doesn’t mean anything. It’s *nonsense*! He was crazy and *you’re* crazy for thinking that anything he said to you meant anything.”

“It means something and you know it. Please tell me. Frank, you don’t understand….”

“It’s nonsense!” Frank exploded and savagely ripped the piece of paper in half. At his table in the corner, the young man with the shaved head shuffled uncomfortably.

Markman froze as the piece of paper she had been carrying with her for every moment of every day for over a year became two pieces and then four. “Oh,” she said, the shock setting in. She sat back down in her chair and rested her aching head in her hands.

It was at that moment that Frank realised how awful she looked. The exhaustion was evident on her face and in the way she sat and she looked like she had aged a decade in only a year. Frank sat back down and guiltily attempted to piece the paper back together.

“Don’t worry about it,” Markman said tiredly as she lifted her head. “You’re right. It was just nonsense but I let myself think it meant something. I *needed* it to mean something. I wanted him to have died for *something*.”

Frank kept his eyes trained down at the pieces of paper. He reread the words again as a knot began to form in his stomach. “At least you got to see him,” Frank said quietly.

Markman suddenly realised her coffee had gone cold as she took a sip of it. She made a disgusted face and set the Styrofoam cup back down, all the time trying to think of something tactful to say in reply to Frank’s comment.

“He knew,” she said.

“No he didn’t,” Frank said miserably.

“Yes, he did. He knew you loved him.”

“But he never got to hear me say it. I never got….”

Markman shook her head. “He knew, Frank.”

“How?”

“He knew things,” Markman said. She couldn’t believe she was repeating those words. They were very volatile words and she had to be careful to whom she repeated them. Anyone else would think she was crazy for indulging in his delusions but Frank understood as well. Frank knew as well as she did that there was something deeper at work here.

Frank shook his head. “He *thought* he knew things.”

Markman stared down at the torn pieces of paper. “In my senior year at high school,” she began, “I took physics because my guidance counsellor told me I needed it to get into medicine at college. So I took the class and I hated every single second of it because I didn’t understand most of it. There was one equation that I could never understand and no matter how hard I tried I couldn’t make myself remember it. So, on the day of the exam I wrote the equation and all the values I had to remember on my leg and covered it with my skirt. Then, halfway through the exam I copied the equation off my leg and onto that paper.”

Frank grinned. “You cheated,” he said, surprised.

“He knew,” Markman said frankly.

Frank’s grin disappeared.

“No one knew I cheated in my senior physics exam. I didn’t tell anyone. But *he* knew, Frank. He knew that *and* he knew that you loved him. He knew that you were going to be okay. He knew.”

Frank didn’t have a chance to respond as his attention was diverted to a nervous teenage boy who’d just entered the coffee shop. Frank stood up and apologised and hurried over to the blonde boy who was standing terrified at the side of the crowded room. The boy looked immensely relieved to see Frank and let Frank take his gloved hand and pull him over to the booth that Markman was still occupying.

“Doctor, this is my friend, Maes,” Frank said assertively and then introduced Markman to Maes. “She used to be my therapist,” Frank said and Maes nodded knowingly, his eyes still wide and frightened.

“I’m taking him to his session at two,” Frank said and glanced at his watch.

“I’ll just wait….” Maes trailed off and pointed to a corner. Frank nodded and Maes stumbled off, his hands clenched tightly in his jacket pockets as though he was afraid someone might touch them.

In the brief moment that Maes had removed his hands from his pocket to point to the corner Markman noticed the very distinct pair of gloves Maes had been wearing. She knew them because she had been the one to buy them in the first place.

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” she said cautiously as Frank sat back down.

Frank glanced over where Maes was cringing in the corner. “He’s just like me,” Frank said, ignoring Markman’s warning. “Different guys, of course, but he’s the same.”

“Frank, be careful.”

Frank stood up and smiled for the first time all day. “Of course,” he said. He picked the pieces of paper up off the table and tucked them carefully inside his wallet.

Markman’s suspicions were immediately aroused. “I thought you said it was just nonsense,” she said and stood up to stare Frank down.

Frank returned the wallet to the back pocket of his jeans. “Yeah,” he said, “but it was *his* nonsense.”

Markman was not convinced and Frank knew it. She knew that the words meant something to him. The words did mean something to Frank but he would never tell her. She would never know but that didn’t matter. Frank had taken the paper from her. She was free.

“Bye, Doctor,” Frank said and touched her arm affably.

“Take care of him,” Markman said worriedly as Frank walked off towards Maes.

Frank nodded and swept an arm around Maes, guiding him out of the coffee shop. As Markman rifled through her bag for her purse she didn’t notice the young man with the shaved head get up and leave.

Frank was going to do much more than look after Maes. Yes, Frank

had much bigger and better plans than that. He was going to do exactly what a piece of paper about half the size of a playing card told him to do.

Frank was going to fix him.

Don't understand? Got a question about the ending? See chapter 22 for frequently asked questions. Major spoilers ahead.

Frequently Asked Questions ***CONTAINS SPOILERS***

Chapter Summary

Copied from my livejournal

I've had quite a few people ask the same questions so I thought i'd create this quick reference post for any questions you may have. If you have any more, please feel free to ask!
Major spoilers ahead

How did Gerard die?
Two options:
1. As mentioned directly in Chapters 8, 12, 13, 14 and 17 and implied in many others, Gerard has brain damage as a result of a severe head trauma that he received on the night he shot Mikey. Sometimes, as a direct result of brain injury, aneurysms form and when Skull smashed Gerard's head against the table in Chapter 20, his aneurysm burst and he had a stroke from the resulting bleeding.

Therefore the pain Gerard was feeling was real, except his fragile mind interpreted it as Them cutting into his brain.

2. They finally caught up to him.

Did Frank see Gerard before he died?
No, Gerard hallucinated Frank's visit in chapter 20. But he did know that Frank loved him.

Who was Frank testifying against in the epilogue?
Gerard's father helped to get Frank's rapists arrested and Frank was testifying against the two men to have them incarcerated.

Was Jasper the bald man stalking Markman in the epilogue?
I'm not going to tell you what to believe. If you think it was…then

you're probably right.

What did Gerard's note say?
Two different answers (pick the one you want to believe):
1. The note is irrelevant. Gerard was crazy and all he wrote was nonsense, as Frank said.
2. It was implied that the note contained Gerard's secret on how to "fix" people, hence Frank's decision to "fix" Maes in the final sentence.

Do They really exist?
What do you think?

Was it Them following Frank from the restaurant in the epilogue?
Depends if you think They are real.

What will happen to Ray, Bob, Bert and Adam?
They were pretty darn crazy so they're probably gonna be in Bluestone for a while yet.

I have more questions, how can I contact you?
Email me!!
I check this account regularly and love all questions/feedback. Sorry, temporarily not accepting emails.

WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN!?!?
Art is the weapon.

Just kidding, I have no idea and I wrote the damn thing.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!